

The sins of his father

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Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2013-03-08 20:17:52

Updated: 2014-03-29 20:35:28

Packaged: 2016-04-27 04:07:06

Rating: M

Chapters: 18

Words: 99,615

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: Things were never easy for the half human-half Sangheili Vilan Kalmare Jones but after his father's murder at the hands of the covenant he was forced to flee his home planet with his mother. Vilan decided to follow in his father's foot steps and enlist into the UNSC marine corps to become the first Sangheili marine. (rated M for language violence sexual content sequel to Unsung)

## 1. Fresh off the bus

**\*\*UNSC Marine Corps training base Ft Johnson planet Hummel.\*\***

Drill instructor Gunnery Sergeant Joseph Willy sat in his office as he went over some last minute paper work as he waited for the buses carrying the newjack privates to arrive. He looked at his roster and the circled name: Jones, Vilan K. and sighed heavily. A light knocking on his door frame caused him to look up.

"How's it going gunny?" First Sergeant Peterson said stepping into the office.

"What can I do for you top?" Willy asked getting to his feet. The two marines would never act like this in front of the new recruits but things were a little more relaxed outside of basic training.

"I'm sure you heard about your special recruit," Peterson said.

"The Elite?" Willy asked glancing at the roster. "Yeah I know but why did you give him to me?"

"Because you have a way with problem privates and squaring them away," Peterson explained.

"Gee thanks," Willy said rolling his eyes. "You know I don't really care how he managed to enlist but why. Is he working on his citizenship?"

"The bastard's already a citizen of the UNSC," Peterson said crossing his arms and leaning against the back wall.

"How?" Was all Willy said.

"It seems his father was a marine his mother an Elite," Peterson explained. "They were living on an Elite planet and fled when his father was killed during a Covenant uprising."

"Jesus," Willy said. "His father was a human...then killed by the Covenant if I had to bet that would have something to do with his enlistment. How long has he been in reception?" When new recruits arrive they spend about a week in a reception company taking care of all their paper work, going over the basic customs(marching, cadence, saluting addressing NCOs) and received their first issue to include: uniforms, psychical training uniforms, cold weather gear, wet weather gear, hydration gear, boots, running shoes and hygiene items.

"A month," Peterson explained.

"What?" Willy said surprised. "Then he should have been in Bravo company not Charlie. Why was he there so long?"

"The motherfucker is seven and a half feet tall with massive fucking feet," Peterson explained chuckling a little. "We only had a few uniforms and one size off boots that would fit him they had to order more. The bastard is lucky that his feet are like ours or we couldn't have issued him boots at all. Then medical took two pints of his blood."

"Two whole pints, what the fuck for?" Willy asked.

"If there would be an accident we wouldn't have any blood that could replace any he had lost," Peterson explained.

"One last thing that's been bugging me," Willy said. "How'd he get a security clearance? I mean he could very well be a spy."

"Well they ran a back ground check but he didn't have much of a back ground to go through," Peterson said. "They only gave him a secret clearance and I don't think he will ever get top secret. He'll be stuck as enlisted for his entire career, they won't let him go officer or spec ops either. Now look sharp the buses should be here soon."

"After you top," Willy said placing the iconic brown brimmed hat on his head as he followed the First Sergeant out of the office. He walked out of the barrack and into the company training area or C.T.A. The barrack was two stores with four sleeping bays for each of the company's four platoons, two on the upper level two on the bottom, and four different entrances for each platoon. The C.T.A. was still part of the barrack it was a large square concert pad with a hanger high ceiling and the only closed off side was the wall that the entrances of the sleeping bays were set into. Not far from the C.T.A. was a wide concert path that changed to a steep grade that ran down the hill to the parking lot that four green buses just pulled into. Willy joined the rest of the drill instructors and found the other two for his platoon: Staff Sergeant Espenhover and Staff Sergeant George. Each platoon had three drill instructors so a total of 12 were walking down the path towards the buses.

"You want them?" Espenhover asked Willy.

"No they're all yours," Willy said crossing his arms and stopping near the edge of the C.T.A. "Fourth platoon is the last bus." Willy called after Espenhover as he marched down the path making a bee line for the last bus. By the time he got to it the bus had come to a complete stop and the first private of froth platoon was just starting down the bus's stairs. He wore a new crisp uniform and hugged his overstuffed duffel bag loaded with all of his issue to his chest as he wasn't allowed to wear it on his back. He had just left the stairs and right behind him was another recruit moving down the stairs. The first private had started to walk up the sidewalk heading towards the C.T.A. Sergeant Espenhover smiled inwardly, outwardly he wore a scrawl, just before he pounced.

"OH FUCK NO!" He screamed at the top of his lungs as he shoved the private from behind. He fell over landing on his duffel bag as he struggled to get to his feet Epenhover was on him bent over and screaming in his ear. "THAT'S OK SWEET HEART WE'LL WAIT FOR YOU! FUCKING RUN ASSHOLE! ALL OF YOU FUCKING RUN UP TO THE C.T.A!"

"Yes sir," The Private said getting to his feet and started to run awkwardly caring the heavy bag. The private right behind him not wanting to get yelled at also started to run to catch up with the one that had been shoved. The other drill instructors started to welcome their own platoons as the shouting and heckling started. Espenhover paid them no mind as he walked to the bus's stairs as the fourth private moved slowly down them as he couldn't see them or his feet. Grabbing hold of the duffel bag the private clung to Espenhover pulled him forward that private also fell onto his bag.

"IT SHOULD TAKE YOU TWO FUCKING SECONDS TO MAKE IT DOWN THOSE STAIRS PRIVATE!" Espenhover shouted as he walked up them pushing a private back into the aisle. Now on the bus Espenhover turned to the bus driver and in a normal tone. "Sir I would get off your bus if I was you." The bus driver, a former marine himself, chuckled as he jumped between two privates to get off his bus. More privates fought with their bags trying to get to the stairs and off of the bus.

"YOU ALL HAVE 20 FUCKING SECONDS TO GET OFF MY GOD DAMN BUS!" Espenhover screamed as he pulled a smoke grenade from his pocket. "20 FUCKING SECONDS!" He pulled the pin and let it drop to his feet and kicked it down the aisle. It bounced off of several boots before coming to a rest under a seat near the middle of the bus. The grenade let out a soft pop just before white smoke began to bellow from it quickly filling the air. The sound of coughing started, as the privates pushed against each other trying to get to the stairs and off the bus not being able to see. Many more fell down the stairs and one missed them completely landing hard on his duffel bag.

"I can't breathe!" A recruit called out from near the back of the slowly moving line.

"QUIT YOUR FUCKING BELLY ACHING!" Espenhover screamed at the private. "IT'S JUST FUCKING SMOKE! THE NEXT ONE WILL BE GAS IF YOU ARE NOT OFF MY BUS IN 30 FUCKING SECONDS! 29...28..27...26..." Now the pushing began as the remaining recruits struggled to get off the bus afraid the crazy drill instructor would gas them. Drill Instructor Espenhover had gassed a bus full of privates but after his ass

chewing by the first sergeant he wasn't allowed to do it again. The last three private got stuck on the stairs as they all tried to leave at once and were all panicking and wouldn't back up so one could slip by. Espenhover helped them out by planting a booted foot on one of their backs and pushed. The three landed in a heap at the foot of the stairs. Espenhover walked down the stairs slowly as the last of the smoke flowed out the door behind him. The slowest of the privates was just getting to his feet when Espenhover firmly but not hard enough to cause pain planted the bottom of his foot on the recruit's ass knocking him to the ground again.

"GET YOUR ASS IN GEAR AND GET UP THERE PRIVATE!" Espenhover shouted as the recruit tried to get to his feet. As Espenhover watched him get up he saw him. He didn't know how he missed him, he must have gotten off the bus when the smoke had just started and was the thickest. The Elite was easily over seven feet tall and carried his duffel bag easily as he ran effortlessly up the steep incline passing the other recruits. The motherfucker was in shape Espenhover would give him that but becoming physical fit was only half of the point of basic training. Walking up behind a slow moving private Espenhover shoved him from behind before moving along side of him.

"LET'S GO ASSHOLE WE'RE WAITING ON YOU!" Espenhover screamed his mouth inches from his ear spit landing on his check.

"Yes sir," The Private said only being able to increase his speed slightly.

"ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME!" Espenhover shouted after the speed change. "THAT IS ALL THE FUCKING FASTER YOU CAN RUN?!"

"No sir," The flustered private said managed to increase to a fast jog. Espenhover patted the private and walked over to another one who had dropped his duffel bag and was struggling to pick it up.

"YOU NEED SOME HELP PRIVATE?!" Espenhover shouted as the private bent over in a third attempt to pick up the heavy bag. The private physically jumped from being shouted at and drop his bag again.

"Sir no sir," The Private said as he bent down to get it again but Espenhover was quicker reaching down with a muscular arm and picked the bag up one handed by the strap.

"ALLOW ME!" He screamed as the private turned around to face him. The drill instructor then gripped the strap with both hands and started to spin as he held his arms fully extended. On his third time around he let go of the strap the momentum of the spin flinging the bag back down the hill as it landed in the grass. The private looked at Espenhover then at his bag and then back to Espenhover.

"WELL GO FUCKING GET IT PRIVATE!" Drill Instructor George shouted with the aid of a megaphone coming up behind the private causing him to jump again.

"Yes sir," The Private said running after his bag with George in toe.

"LET'S GO PRIAVTE! DOUBLE TIME! DOUBLE TIME!" George screamed the end of the megaphone inches from the flustered recruit's ear. The recruit reached the grass and started to slow his pace as he descended down

the grade. "FASTER PRIAVTE FASTER! IF THAT WAS A WOUNDED MARINE OUT THERE IS THIS HOW LONG YOU WOULD FUCKING TAKE!?"

"No sir," The Private said as he picked up his pace. The moment he did, his heel of his right booted foot landed on a patch of wet grass and the mud underneath it. His right leg shot forward moving further down the hill as he landed hard on his ass wiping most of the mud up with the seat of his uniform pants as he slid down the hill. He would've slid all the way down if he didn't run into his duffel bag also resting in mud. He shakily got to his feet the entire back half of him covered in mud as he reached over to pick up his bag. A sharp whistle sounded behind him and he looked back in time to see a tiny puff of smoke coming up out of the grass. His mind was still trying to figure out what his eyes were seeing when the whistle stopped and a heartbeat later there was a deafening bang. The recruit twisted around as he drove back to the ground landing beside his bag his front now covered in mud also. The private got to his feet again patting himself down checking for blood as his ears rang.

"LETS GO SHIT HEELS!" George shouted from the top of the hill. "IT WASN'T A REAL MORTAR FUCKNUTS IF IT WAS YOU'D BE FUCKING DEAD!" The private picked up his bag, also coated in mud and started up the hill. He made it half way up when he slipped and fell on his stomach again almost sliding down the hill again. Feeling tired and degraded the recruit got to his hands and knees and started to crawl up the hill dragging his bag behind him.

"I KNOW YOU CAN MOVE FASTER THEN THAT!" George screamed as he pulled out another mortar simulator and pulled the pin. When he threw it this time it landed to the right of the private and immediately started to whistle. The private scrambled to his feet almost slipping and falling a third time and made it to the top of the hill just as it went off. The recruit fell to the ground again and panted heavily clutching his bag. George didn't give him a chance to rest however as he pressed the megaphone next to his ear.

"DON'T TELL ME YOUR FUCKING TIRED ALREADY!" He screamed. "WE HAVEN'T EVEN STARTED YET! LET'S GO SHIT HEELS YOU'RE THE LAST ONE. HURRY UP WAITING ON YOU!" The private picked himself up and ran the rest of the way to the C.T.A. where the rest of the recruits were formed up by platoon as drill instructors screamed at them. He fell into forth platoon's formation as drill instructors yelled at recruits for anything and everything. As they continued to scream at the privates First Sergeant Peterson walked up to the podium and turned the microphone on.

"Greeting on behalf of the commander of 54th infantry battalion of the 3rd infantry brigade," Peterson said most of the recruits unable to hear him due to the drill instructors. "Over the next 12 weeks you will put through a rigorous training regiment to prepare you for the harsh reality of combat. Thank you for your service and welcome to Charlie company. Drill instructors they are yours." With that Peterson stepped away from the microphone knowing full well just about none of the recruits had heard him clearly.

Drill Instructor Willy marched out in front of forth platoon, his platoon, and immediately spotted the Elite he towered over everyone in the formation as he stood at attention. Next to him stood the recruit covered in mud Drill Instructor George yelling with a megaphone in his left ear as Drill Instructor Espenhover screamed in

his right. Willy let them finish before speaking himself.

"Alright privates," Willy said in an even tone much to the surprise of the recruits. "On the command of fall out double time it up those stairs and to the forth platoon sleep bay the door on the second floor all the way to the right. Fall out." All the privates took one step back in unison just before they all broke out in to different speeds of jogs and runs as their physical shape dictated. Espenhover and George screaming at them as they ran up the stairs fighting with the other platoons' recruits and their drill instructors to get to the bay. Willy hung back a little as he walked behind everyone slowly making his way to the bay. He saw the first one to make it to the sleeping bay was the Elite. As he walked up the stairs he wondered if he could work past his own dislike and distrust of his kind. He opened the door and walked in placing his hands behind his back as he walked by the privates as the other drill instructors explained 'toe to line' to them.

The sleeping bay was set with bunks lining three of the four walls making a large U with two wall lockers at the end of each bunk, sitting back to back, one for each recruit. A total of 30 bunks so 60 recruits could sleep with one on the top bunk and one on the bottom. Posters lined the wall that no bunks were set against and two short hallways were set into the poster lined wall. There was a large empty space in the middle of the bay and most of it was taken up by a large UNSC marine corps emblem that was boxed off by four thick black lines, this was the only waxed part of the floor. 'Toe to line' was an invisible line that ran just in front of all the wall lockers with the privates evenly spaced along it so when they stood there they were all in line and standing within one arms reach of their bunk and wall locker. The last private had found his spot finally quieting the two drill instructors as Willy moved down the line and his eyes landed on the Elite.

He defiantly looked like an Elite: gray skin, mandibles and all, except he didn't have the double knees like most of his kind. Instead his legs, although still covered in the gray scaly skin where shaped like a humans, because of this he didn't have the hunched appearance of the others but still looked strange in a marine uniform instead of the traditional Sangheili armor. Gunnery Sergeant Willy wasn't a large man only 5 foot 11 and 190lbs and not an ounce of it was fat but he still gave off an intimidating presence as he walked. His uniform had no wrinkles in it what so ever, all the creases were sharp and thin as a razor, his selves were rolled up the exact number of turns stopping just a bit above his elbows(exposing his many tattoos) they were both at exactly the same height and thickness. His boots shone like mirrors and made a steady clicking as he slowly walked down the line looking straight ahead. His brown drill instructor hat sat slightly forward on his head so it caused a shadow over his eyes that made him look always angry.

"Right about now you all are probably having doubts," Willy began speaking loudly and sharply but not yelling. "'What the fuck have I gotten myself in to'. Is the thought echoing around in your empty heads. Well I love to be the bearer of bad news but it's too late now. You should have thought about that before you joined my beloved crops." A private he had just pasted jaw loosen a little bit before he clamped it tight again. The movement was so subtle no one noticed, not even the recruit but Willy did. He turned around and was instantly face to face with the private the brim of his hat touching

the recruit's forehead.

"GOT SOMETHING TO SAY DICKBREATH?!" Willy screamed right in his face. It was the first time the recruits had heard him yell and it was the loudest of all the drill instructors by far. "WELL!?"

"Sir I was just thinking that a crops, in a military stand point, means a force of a 100,000," The Private explained his throat suddenly dry. "Technically the UNSC marine corps isn't a crops anymore it's a force."

"Oh," Willy said moving his face back a little. "You're very smart let me guess you're the 09 Sierra?"

"Yes sir," The Private said proudly. 09 Sierra was the ID code giving to officer candidates right after basic training he would be heading to an academy to 'learn how to be a leader'.

"Good for you," Willy said getting face to face with the candidate again. "I DON'T TECHNICALLY CARE! DRILL INSTRUCTOR ESPENHOVER BRING THE PRIZE FOR OUR WINNER!" Espenhover disappeared and soon came back with two 25 pound sand bags taped together and handed them to Willy who took out a marker. "HOLD OUT YOUR FUCKING ARMS!" The private did as instructed and held out his arms and Willy set the sandbags on them.

"ALL RIGHT HOOK!" Willy screamed reading the name of the private's uniform and writing Hook's IQ on the two sandbags. "YOU ARE HEREBY ORDERED TO HAVE THIS ON YOUR PERSON AT ALL TIMES IS THAT UNDERSTOOD?!"

"Sir yes sir," Hook said holding onto the 50 pounds of extra weight.

"YOU ARE TO HAVE IT WITH YOU UNTIL I THINK YOU HAVE LOST A FEW IQ POINTS!" Willy shouting finally backing away from the recruit and starting to walk down the line placing his hands behind his back again. "Alright so I know I've got at least one recruit with some brains lets see if I've got anymore. Anyone score high enough on their enlistment exam to be a pilot?" No one raised their hands. "I see any engineers then?" A few privates raised their hands this time. "That's more like it any wrench turners? Where are my mechanics at, any kind." A large group of privates raised their hands. "Ok where's my fagits? I know there is always one." A private half way down the line from Willy one corner of his mouth went up in the smallest of smirks before he was able to get himself under control. He was sure Willy hadn't seen him for he had his back to him but Willy stopped suddenly and turned on his heel. With fire in his eyes he marched toward the recruit.

"WHAT IS SO GODDAMN FUNNY ASSHOLE?!" Willy demanded squaring up with him.

"Nothing sir," The Private said.

"I KNOW YOU'RE FUCKING LIEING TO ME DECKER!" Willy screamed reading the recruit's name tape.

"Sir I thought what you had said early was funny," Decker explained.

"DID YOU NOW?!" Willy screamed. "NOT FAGGIT...\_FAGIT\_! A FIELD ARTILLERY GUNNER IS A \_FAG\_ AND A FIELD ARTLLERY GUNNER IN TRAINING IS A \_FAGIT\_ YOU SICK MINDED FUCK! GOT IT!?"

"Sir yes sir," Decker said.

"I guess I'm a fagit then sir," A Private said raising his hand.

"Who said that?" Willy asked instantly clam again.

"Private Thompson sir," The gunner in training said.

"Well good for you," Willy said turning to face Thompson. "NOW SHUT THE FUCK UP! Alright that means the rest of you are infantry, raise your hands high killers." The rest of the recruits raised their hands this was the largest group of privates to include the Elite. "You are all the dumb motherfuckers. Either you were to stupid to score high enough on your exam to be anything more than infantry. Or even worse you did score high enough you just willingly choose infantry you fucking idiots. After your 12 weeks of training here the rest of you will go elsewhere to receive training on your specific job. Expect for you killers after this it's off to the front lines I hope you don't fear combat because you'll see it. Joining the infantry in a time of war... dumb motherfuckers." Willy's stroll had brought him in front of the Elite his bunkmate was the mud covered private the mud dripping off and pooling at his feet. Willy turned to face the Elite and looked up at him. "What's your name killer?"

"Private Vilan Jones sir," Vilan said in a deep voice his claws curled into fists as he stood at attention.

"How tall are you Private Jones?" Willy demanded.

"Seven feet eight inches sir," Vilan said. Although he was much taller than the drill instructor he still felt as if he was being talked down to.

"Holy shit," Willy remarked. "I hope you don't get your head blow off by a sniper. You get a dental exam?"

"Sir yes sir," Vilan said his mandibles parting allowing him to talk. He had an idea where the drill instructor was going.

"What the fuck did they say?" Willy demanded.

"That they had never seen anything like my teeth and didn't really know what to do sir," Vilan explained. Willy didn't say anything but backed away and walked out to the middle of the floor standing on the emblem.

"Alright now that I know some of you," Willy said placing his arms behind his back and started to pace around the highly polished box. "I am Gunnery Sergeant Willy the senior drill instructor of fourth platoon. This is Staff Sergeant George and Staff Sergeant Espenhover your two other drill instructors." The two other drill instructors were walking in front and behind the privates looking for any reason to yell at them.



"Now that we all know each other," Willy said stop pacing. "Over the next week they are going to go over all the official rules of the marine corps and this training company but we here in forth platoon have some very import unofficial rules you will all follow got it?"

"SIR YES SIR!" The recruits shouted in unison.

"Out fucking standing," Willy said starting to pace again. "Rule one: I will not embarrassed my drill instructors in the presence of any other drill instructors, officers or unicorns. Rule two: My drill instructor is always right. Rule three: I will not masturbate in the shower. Any question?"

"Sir what is a unicorn sir?" Hook asked.

"A unicorn is the code word for extremely high ranking officers and NCOs such as colonel and sergeant majors," Willy explained. "They are called unicorns for you hear a lot about them but you hardly ever see them. And when you do it changes your life for you are either going to get an ass chewing or an award. Alright time for the tour. This is the kill zone." Willy said pointing down at the waxed box with the emblem in it. "You are not authorized at anytime to be in my kill zone unless ordered by a drill instructor. And believe me privates you do not want to be in this kill zone." Willy then walked to one of the short hallways.

"Platoon right face," Drill instructor Espenhover ordered. All the recruits turned to the right smartly bring their left foot even with their right after their turn making one loud clicking sound. They recruits were now in a long single file line that started with the recruit that had the first bunk farthest from the doors. "Forward march." Willy then lead them through the bathroom that had 14 sinks facing a mirror that ran the length of the wall. Opposite the sinks were 14 stalls for the recruits to relieve themselves. A little further down the hall was the laundry room where 12 washers and dryers sat. Then finely to the showers where eight shower heads lined each wall so 16 recruits could shower at once but to the recruits' dismay the dividers between them were just hip high(for the average human and a lot of recruits tossed nervous glances at Vilan). Willy lead them back out into the bay and had them go toe to line again.

"Ok now you're about to know your body a lot better now," Willy said. "Time for a shower drill. You all have exactly three minutes to get your duffel bag into your wall lockers and get out PTs to change into, with a towel and soap. Be stripped down with your towel over your right shoulder and soap in your left hand standing toe to line." The recruits hurry to complete their first task as a platoon digging through their bags to get the required items and get undressed. A private had just shut his wall locker and went to stand toe to line with his towel and soap when Willy screamed at him.

"DID I SAY TO WEAR YOU FUCKING UNDERWEAR!?" Willy demanded.

"Sir no sir," The recruit said.

"THEN TAKE IT OFF AND THEN STAND TOE TO LINE JACKASS!" Willy ordered. The recruit did as instructed and threw his underwear into his wall locker as well and went back to the line completely naked now. The

other privates saw and heard this and hurry to get completely nude most afraid now. Willy didn't do this because he liked to but to get rid as must awkwardness as possible the first night. These recruits were going to need to come together as a unit and the best was to do that was to humiliate them all equally. Most of the recruits were done standing completely naked at the position of attention none daring to make eye contact. A few still crammed their bags in wall lockers when Willy started to count.

"10...9...8...7...6," Willy said as the last few private slammed their lockers closed and stood toe to line when he had reached two. "You two." Willy pointed at two privates. "Turn on all the showers, I would recommend warm water and be back here in 20 seconds."

"Yes sir," They said and left to complete their task returning with five seconds to spare.

"Platoon right face," Willy ordered. The recruits turned to right their bare feet making a muted thud this time. "Forward march." Willy marched them to the showers and had them form two even lines just outside. "Alright on the whistle eight from this line and eight from this line run in find the first empty stall and you will have 1 minute 30 seconds to soap up and rinse off. On the second whistle run out put the towel around your waist and get toe to line and do nothing else. Is that understood?"

"YES SIR!" The naked recruits shouted above the sound of running water. Willy pressed a whistle up to his lips and blew the sharp sound made worse by the tiled surroundings. The first 16 recruits rushed in and got under the water and washed themselves when the whistle blew again and they rushed out as the next 16 rushed in. It was the most difficult for Hook who still held his sandbags with one hand. It was going fine until the last group when the whistle blew for them to leave they turned off the water and rushed out instead of putting the towel around his waist Decker started to dry himself off.

"DID HE SAY TO DRY OFF ASSWIPE?!" Espenhover demanded screaming in Decker's ear as he dropped his towel from being startled.

"Sir no sir," Decker said.

"THEN WHY THE FUCK DID YOU DO IT PRIVATE?!" Espenhover demanded. Before he could answer however Willy walked into the middle of the kill zone again.

"I GAVE YOU ALL A VERY SIMPLE ORDER AND YOU STILL COULDN'T FOLLOW IT!" Willy shouted as the recruits got toe to line sopping wet. "WHEN YOU DON'T FOLLOW ORDERS IN COMBAT PEOPLE DIE! TO MAKE SURE NONE OF YOU DISOBEY AN ORDER AGAIN I'M GOING TO MAKE SURE YOU NEVER FORGET THIS NIGHT! FRONT LEANING REST POSTION MOVE!" The recruits dropped down to the classic push up position arms fully extended resting on their toes.

"DOWN!" Will ordered. The privates lowered themselves down with their arms careful not to touch their genetalia, only covered by a towel, on the floor. "UP!" The recruits pushed themselves back up by fully extending their arms again. When they did so a recruit's towel fell off and slid to the floor. "DOWN...UP...DOWN...UP...DOWN UP DOWN UP DOWN UP DOWN UPDOWNUPDOWNUPDOWNUPDOWNUPDOWNUPDOWN UP DOWN!"

HOLD IT! HOOOLLLDD IT!" By now no recruits' towel had stayed on and most barely held themselves off the ground with shaking arms. The only one that wasn't struggling at all was Vilan "HOOOLLLDDD IT!" A recruit's arms gave out and his body slammed onto the floor making a wet smack. "UP! RECOVER!" The recruits got to their feet and to the position of attention.

"You have five minutes to change into PTs and be in your bunks expect the first fire guard shift they'll be in uniform," Willy ordered as water mixed with a light sweat dripped on the floor. "The fire guard is one hour shifts starting with 401 and 402(the first pair of bunks) then 403 and 404. See the pattern?"

"Sir yes sir!" The humiliate, wet and naked recruits shouted. Five minutes later all the recruits were in their bunks(most thinking they had made a horrible mistake in enlisting) expect for 401 and 402 who stood by the desk next to the door. Willy explained how each shift had a different cleaning duty and that he expected the bay to be spotless in the morning. "Alright privates get some sleep you're going to need it you have a long day tomorrow." With that all three drill instructors walked out into the night air after turning off the lights.

"They going to meet Bunny tonight?" Espenhover asked Willy.

"No they've been through enough tonight," Willy explained as the three walked. "They'll meet him tomorrow night."

## 2. A combat wake up and the kill zone god

Author's note: Cadence will be written as the cadence caller will be normal and the formation's response will be in *italics*.

Drill Instructor Willy walked up the concrete path to the C.T.A. holding a cup of cold bitter coffee. He took a drink and looked at his watch it was 0320 wake up was 0330, he taped the pouch on his hip to ensure everything was in it. Privates in basic training loved to bitch about how much sleep they get, or the lack there of. What most failed to realize is that drill instructors got less since they couldn't leave till after their recruits were sound asleep and be there before they woke up. Most instructors didn't really sleep the first few days only took naps when they could and drank plenty of coffee.

"Morning gunny," Espenhover said drinking from his own coffee cup. "You bring the alarm clocks?"

"Of course," Willy said patting the hip pouch he had put on that morning. "George?"

"Already up there waiting," Espenhover explained walking next to Willy as they entered the C.T.A. and headed for the stairs. "I thought we couldn't do this anymore?"

"No we're not *supposed* to," Willy said finishing his coffee. "I still had these left over from last cycle." The two drill instructors climbed the stairs nodding greetings to third platoons' drill instructors. Leaning against forth platoon's sleeping bay door with crossed arms was Drill Instructor George.

"Bout time you two showed up," George said with a yawn. "I've been here all fucking night and I would like to go take a nap so I don't miss breakfast."

"And miss their first wake up?" Willy asked opening the hip pouch.

"Well maybe I could stay for that," George said perking up. "What'd you get?"

"Two sim grenades for you," Willy said handed them to Espenhover. "Two combat simulators for you." Willy handed George what looked like oversized grenades. "And two flashbangs for myself." Being a drill instructor definitely had its disadvantages but it also had its advantages this was one of the latter.

The two privates at the fire guard desk were 407 and 408 and were trying their hardest to not fall asleep. After they had cleaned the showers, their cleaning duty, till they shone and gotten a head count it left them with nothing to do. It was 0330 their shift would be over in half an hour and they could go back to sleep. The sound of the door opening caused the two recruits to look up and over at it. The door had been pulled open just a crack allowing a small ribbon of yellow light, from the lights in the C.T.A., to spill into the almost completely dark bay. A object suddenly passed through the light landing inside the bay becoming lost in the dark a heartbeat later the door slammed shut stirring some privates from their slumber. The two on fire watch had just gotten to their feet and swept their eyes around the bay trying to find the object when it exploded with a deafening bang and puff of white smoke.

"Holy shit!" One of them shouted as he dove behind the desk. Every recruit was instantly awake and most fell off their bunks and they scrambled to their feet. They peered into the dark room looking for anything when the bay door opened again and another object flew in just before the door slammed shut again. Most recruits had seen it and where it landed and stared at its general location as it was lost in the pitch black bay. Suddenly the bay was filled with a blinding light and even louder bang as the flashbang detonated. All the recruits were blinded going from pitch black to blinding light as all were forced to shut their eyes. When they opened their eyes again they still couldn't see as theirs eyes had not adjusted to the dark yet, until the second flashbang went off.

"God damn it," Decker said as he fell from his bunk unable to see anything but a image of the bay bathed in white light burned into his retina. Most of the other privates on the top bunks had fallen unable to see as they covered their eyes with their hands and waved their free one in front of them to keep from running into anything. It didn't quit work as Vilan's bunkmate slammed into him and fell to the floor. None of the recruits saw the bay door open again, even the ones on fire guard that were only a foot away from it, as two object flew in this time. When the two combat simulators went off they set off smaller changers in quick secession sounding just like automatic weapon's fire.

"What the fuck?!" A still blinded private screamed as he dove to the floor and covered his head.

"Are they shooting at us?!" Vilan's bunkmate screamed from under his bunk.

"I don't believe so," Vilan said loudly enough to be heard but not shouting. The other sim grenade landed inside the bay and added to the chaos. Every recruit was on the floor covering their head as combat simulators echoed in the dark. After a few last pops from the combat simulators things got unsettling quiet in the bay as the recruits slowly raised their heads but stayed on the floor.

"Is it over?" Hook asked carefully.

"I think so," One of the recruits on fire guard said standing up behind the desk.

"IT IS FAR FROM FUCKING OVER PRIVATES!" Willy shouted throwing open both doors and marching into the dark bay. As Espenhover entered he turned on the lights blinding the privates again as their eyes were just getting used to the dark again.

"TOE TO LINE LIMP DICKS!" Willy screamed. "TOE TO FUCKING LINE!" The recruits hurried to get on their feet and stand at attention.

"HOOK WHERE ARE YOU BRAINS?" Espenhover shouted his mouth inches from Hook's ear.

"What do you mean sir?" Hooked asked confused.

"YOU'RE SO GOD DAMN SMART YOU FIGURE IT OUT!" Espenhover screamed spit landing on Hook's ear. Hook looked behind him and to his bunk and resting under were the two sandbags. He rushed to grab them and got back to the line. As Espenhover walked past Hook he slapped the sandbags out of his hand.

"A mind is a terrible thing to waste Hook," He said walking past. As the rest of the recruits stood toe to line, including the ones on fire guard Willy stood in the middle of the bay.

"Alright you all have 10 minutes to shave, change into summer PTs the ones you slept in, with your pistol belt around your waist with booth canteens full to bursting, bunks made, and be down in the C.T.A. formed up. Exactly ten minutes." The recruits snapped to it most grabbing their hygiene kits to go shave. Vilan who had the advantage of not having hair grabbed his belt and canteens and ran to fill them before all the sinks were taken by privates as they all tried to shave at once. Snapping the belt around his waist he ran back to his bunk and started to make it, something he had gotten very good at having spent a month in reception. While the other recruits had to stand on the ends of the bunks to make the top bunks Vilan simple stood on the floor being tall enough to reach the sheets. After his sheets were tucked neatly under his mattress and no wrinkles were present he turned to leave the bay and ran out the door checking the time with the watch his father had given him. He had two minutes to spare as other recruits started to trickle down to the C.T.A. having also complete their tasks. As Vilan left the bay he passed his bunkmate who still have shaving cream on his face, holding a water soaked pistol belt, and running to make his bunk knowing he didn't have much time left.

Shaking his head at his bunkmate Vilan left the bay and joined the

growing fourth platoon formation. Drill Instructor Will and Espenhover had both changed into PTs as well but both wore a bright blue vest over their gray shirts that had DI followed by their name underneath. Willy stood staring at his watch as Vilan took his place in the formation. As the last few fourth platoon privates hurried down the stairs Willy suddenly shouted.

"ALL OF YOU ALREADY NOT IN FORMATION FORM UP OVER HERE NOW!" Willy shouted having the late comers form up in front of the rest of fourth platoon. "DO YOU KNOW WHY I HAD YOU FORM UP HERE?!"

"Sir because me missed the deadline to be formed up sir," Vilan's bunkmate said.

"That is correct Private Zimmerman," Willy said reading his name tape. "WHY DID YOU NOT MAKE THE DEADLINE PRIVATE?!"

"Sir because I didn't make my bunk in time sir," Zimmerman explained.

"Who is your bunkmate?" Willy demanded.

"The Elite sir," Zimmerman said casting Vilan a sideways glance.

"SAY AGAIN PRIVATE!" Willy shouted getting face to face with Zimmerman. Zimmerman quickly realized his mistake and corrected himself.

"Private Jones sir," Zimmerman said his heart hammering in his chest now.

"PRIVATE JONES FRONT AND CENTER!" Willy ordered. Vilan broke ranks and ran to stand next to Zimmerman at the position of attention.

"Sir Private Jones reporting as ordered sir!" Vilan shouted.

"I see you made it down here on time," Willy remarked. "Why didn't your bunkmate?"

"I guess he wasn't fast enough sir," Vilan said unsure of what to say.

"SO WHY THE FUCK DIDN'T YOU HELP HIM?!" Willy demanded.

"Sir I-" Vilan began.

"JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Willy screamed. He wasn't able to get face to face with him like the other recruits but Vilan still felt like he was. "YOU COULD'VE HELP MAKE HIS BUNK OR MAKE IT FOR HIM SINCE YOU DIDN'T SHAVE THIS MORNING! ONE THING THAT YOU ALL NEED TO GET THROUGH THOSE THICK SKULLS OF YOURS IS THAT YOU ARE NO LONGER INDIVIDUALS YOU ARE A UNIT! THIS MEANS YOU SUCCEED AS A UNIT AND YOU FAIL AS A UNIT! BECUASE JONES HAS FAILED ZIMMERMAN HE HAS FAILED YOU SO YOU ALL HAVE FAILED! FRONT LEANING REST POSITION MOVE!" Fourth platoon got into the push-up position resting their hands on the cold rough pavement. "DOWNUPDOWNUPDOWNUPDOWNUPDOWN UPDOWNUP. DOWN...UP...DOWN...UP...DOWN...UP DOWNUPDOWNUPDOWNUPDOWNUPDOWN ... UP. RECOVER!"

Fourth platoon got their feet feeling humiliated as the other platoons watched them. The late comers fell into fourth platoon's formation and fell quiet. Willy took his place in front of the formation.

"At easy," Willy ordered. The recruits spared their legs shoulder width apart and placed their hands behind their backs simultaneously the position of parade rest. This was the position that the other platoons were already in. After fourth platoon had caught up First Sergeant Peterson spoke.

"Fall in," He ordered. Everyone snapped to attention at once. "Receive the report. Report."

"First sergeant," First platoon's senior drill instructor said while saluting. "First platoon 60 assigned 60 ready for duty." He held his salute until Peterson returned it.

"First sergeant. Second platoon 60 assigned 60 ready for duty," The second platoons SDI reported.

"First sergeant third platoon 60 assigned 60 ready for duty."

"First sergeant," Willy said bring his hand up in prefect salute. "Fourth platoon 60 assigned 60 prepped and ready for duty first sergeant." Peterson returned his salute and then went back to attention.

"Company!" He shouted.

"Platoon!" All the senior drill instructors shouted at once turning their heads to looking over their right shoulder.

"Attention!" Peterson ordered even though everyone was already at attention. Peterson then turned to face a captain walking into the C.T.A. "Morning sir." Peterson said saluting.

"Carry on," The Captain said returning the salute. "My name is Captain Ford I am the company commander. Welcome and enjoy your run." Ford walked inside the barrack without saying anything more.

"Drill instructors get them ready for morning PT," Peterson ordered saluting again. Willy returned the salute them turned to face fourth platoon.

"Alright maggots toady is suppose to be a platoon run on the track after warm up drills," Willy explained. Vilan couldn't help but noticed the other platoons marching around the C.T.A. and down a second path heading towards the PT field and track. "But who wants to run on a nice flat track. No you lucky bastards are going to run the roads of Eagle Run hills and all. As for the warm up drills I think you're already warmed up enough from your push-ups earlier. Oh and because I am in a good mood Hook you can leave your sandbags here. So on that note platoon right face. Forward march." Willy then marched them down to the parking look and to the road next to it, trees on either side of it.

"Keep up with me," Espenhover said moving in front of the formation.

"Double tiiiiiiimmmmmeeee!" Willy shouted. "March." Espenhover started to run then the first rank of the formation running to caught up. Soon the formation was running at a fast jog slow run pace everyone in step. They kept this up following Espenhover for awhile as some started to huff and puff as their canteens sloshed around on their belts.

"Well this is boring," Willy remarked running alongside the formation not even winded. "You motherfuckers know how cadence works right?"

"Yes sir," Hook said on behalf of the platoon.

"Good because I'm not spouse to be calling cadence yet but I'm fucking board," Willy explained. "And so help me if you fuckers don't sound off you be running in the front leaning rest is that understood?"

"Sir yes sir!" The formation shouted.

"Left, left, left, right ah leeeeft!" Willy started.

"\_Left, left, left, right ah leeeeft!" \_The recruits shouted in unison.

"Up in the morning with the rising son!"

"\_Up in the morning with the rising son\_"

"Gonna run all day till the running done!"

"\_Gonna run all day till the running done\_"

"Eat my breakfast to damn soon!"

"\_Eat my breakfast to damn soon\_"

"Hungry as hell...by noon!"

"\_Hungry as hell...by noon\_"

"Went to the mess sergeant on my knees!"

"\_Went to the mess sergeant on my knees\_"

"I said mess sergeant mess sergeant feed me please!"

"\_I said mess sergeant mess sergeant feed me please\_"

"Mess sergeant said with a big ol grin!"

"\_Mess sergeant said with a big ol grin!"\_

"You wanna be a marine you gotta be thin!"

"\_You wanna be a marine you gotta be thin\_"

"Not bad maggots," Willy said still in prefect control of his breathing and stride. Some of the recruits had given up on the



cadence as they huffed and gasped for breath. However all were still in step and keeping up with Drill Instructor Espenhover. "Let's try another one."

"Pelican drop ship rolling down the strip!"

"\_Pelican drop ship rolling down the strip\_"

"16 troopers on a one-way trip!"

"\_16 troopers on a one-way trip\_"

"Mission top secret destination unknown!"

"\_Mission top secret destination unknown\_"

"Don't even know if we're ever coming home!"

"\_Don't even know if we're ever coming home\_"

"Stand up, hook up, shuffle to the door!"

"\_Stand up, hook up, shuffle to the door\_"

"Jump right out on the count of four!"

"\_Jump right out on the count of four\_"

"If my main don't open wide!"

"\_If my main don't open wide\_"

"I've got a reserve by my side!"

"\_I've got a reserve by my side\_"

"If that one should fail me too!"

"\_If that one should fail me too\_"

"Then lookout below I'm coming through!"

"\_Then lookout below I'm coming through\_"

"If I die on the old drop zone!"

"\_If I die on the old drop zone\_"

"Box me up and ship me home!"

"\_Box me up and ship me home\_"

"Tell my mama I did my best!"

"\_Tell my mama I did my best\_"

"Bury me in the leaning rest!"

"\_Bury me in the leaning rest\_" That was the last cadence Willy did as the last few lines were barely wheezed out by half of the

formation as most huffed and puffed now. Again the only one un-phased was Vilan. Most had stayed in the formation expect for one recruit who had fallen out of the formation and was running a few peaces behind the formation and slowly loosening them. Willy was on him instantly.

"YOU HAVE FIVE FUCKING SECONDS TO MAKE TO THE FRONT OF THE FOMRATION!" Willy screamed. "FIVE! FOUR!" The recruit managed to increase his speed enough to make it to the front of the formation and then slowed to get in step. However he was gasping and wheezing unable to really take a full breath. The recruits didn't know it but Espenhover had already turned them around and was heading back to the barrack. Soon the formation could see the glow of parking lot lights. A since of hope that it was almost over spared through the recruits.

"Alright when I say go," Willy said addressing the formation. "You are going to run as fast as you can to the parking lot. Understood?"

"Yes sir," The recruits wheezed.

"GO!" Willy said just before he broke out into an all out sprint. Only a few of the recruits actually went into a sprint, most just jogged a little faster some even slowed. Vilan finely able to break free of the slow formation sprinted full tilt passing the other privates and gaining on Willy. Although he didn't have the born advantage of the his kinds' double knee he was still just as fast and wasn't even winded as he gained on Willy. Willy hearing the sound of heavy footsteps on pavement turned his head and saw Vilan gaining on him and increased his speed running as fast as he could go. Vilan saw this as a challenge and ran faster as well trying to catch the drill instructor. Vilan had almost caught him when Willy stepped into the parking lot and came to a sudden stop. Vilan had to swerve to avoid hitting the drill instructor as he came to a stop himself.

"You're pretty fast aren't you private," Willy said a little out of breath as he wiped a light sweat from his face.

"I am sir," Vilan said proudly not out of breath or tired at all. Willy wanted to yell then but he wasn't quite ready to yet.

"You know private," Willy began. "Your unit is only as strong as your weakest member. Do you understand this?"

"Sir yes sir!" Vilan said when he really had no idea what he meant at all. Willy was about to go into more detail when more recruits started to get to the parking lot. They came to a stop and placed their hands on their knees their gray shirts soaked through with sweat.

"Alright form it up," Willy ordered. Then once the last recruit, who was being shouted at by Espenhover, made it to the formation Willy marched them back to the barrack and had them change into their uniforms. They didn't have time to shower so they had to settle for just wiping the sweat from their armpits and faces and going heavy on the deodorant. The four platoons marched to the mess hall and were rushed through. The recruits weren't even allowed to pick what they wanted everyone got scrambled eggs. First recruit got bacon, second got sausage, third got a biscuit with gravy. Everyone got dices

potatoes then they could pick either an apple or banana. To drink they had a glass of a red colored liquid and a glass of blue colored liquid, that only tasted slightly unlike water. A recruit tried to grab a fork and a drill instructor slapped it out of his hand.

"YOU ARE ONLY AUTHORIZED A SPOON!" He had shouted at the recruit. "ANYTHING YOU GET CAN BE EATEN WITH A SPOON!" The recruits sat down and started to shove food into their mouths as fast as they could. They were heckled by the drill instructors the entire time with shouts of "YOU DO NOT NEED TO TASTE YOUR FOOD!" or "FOOD IS ONLY THERE TO NOURISH YOUR BODYS, NOT TO TASTE GOOD!" Most had only eaten half of their food when shouts of "DRINK AND GET OUT!" were heard and each recruit had to finish their drinks and leave immediately. Once every recruit had gotten their food eaten some of it, formed up outside they marched back to the C.T.A. where they were issued their rifles. Old and abused MA5C most of them had no paint left on the bolts and had a sticky unsmooth action. They were told they were required to have their rifles with them at all times except when they went to the bathroom and slept.

After their weapon issue they were taken to the company classroom only a short march from the barrack where they had their first of many classes: The history of the UNSC Marine Corps. They took a break for lunch (again not only allowed to choose: first recruit chicken, second pasta, third fish) had a class on proper uniform wear and then customs. After dinner, with still no more time to eat, they were released to their drill instructors. Willy explained what a slandered operating procedure or SOP was for their wall lockers and expected every recruits' to look like it. Then Espenhover explained how to field strip their rifles and clean them. So they spent the rest of the night organizing their wall lockers and cleaning their rifles. They had a shower drill, got it right this time and were allowed to go to bed at 2100 except the first fire guard shift which was 411 and 412. At 0132 Vilan and Zimmerman were on fire guard being 419 and 420. After they had gotten a head count and a barrel count (their rifles) locked inside the weapon racks chained to the two support columns running through the middle of the bay. Vilan was on his hands and knees buffing the kill zone by hand, their cleaning duty for the 0100 to 0200 shift, as Zimmerman manned the fire guard desk.

"Just finish half and I'll get the second half," Zimmerman stage whispered to Vilan as he buffed.

"That is not required of you I can complete this task on my own," Vilan said without looking up.

"Come on man you can't do everything yourself," Zimmerman said.

"What do you mean?" Vilan asked still buffing.

"You're in shape we get that," Zimmerman said. "But you need to understand team work. I know we haven't done anything that really requires that yet but we will. My friends are marines they explained that if we don't work together this will be a living hell." Vilan thought about Zimmerman's words carefully as he buffed and was about to respond when the bay door opened and a man walked in. Vilan and Zimmerman jumped up and got to the position of parade rest for the man wore the uniform of a UNSC marine with the rank of gunnery sergeant and the hat of a drill instructor. However his face was

covered by a rabbit mask. The masked instructor walked over to Vilan and in whisper spoke to him.

"Thank you for buffing my altar private," The masked man said.

"You are welcome sir," Vilan said unsure of what to do. The man's head cocked to the side inquisitively, in an almost inhuman way.

"I don't know who you are speaking to," The man said as he walked over and stood in the middle of the kill zone. "Wake everyone up and had them stand around my altar." Vilan hurried to wake up everyone and have them stand around the kill zone as the masked man bent down did something inside the kill zone. A sharp smell spread throughout the bay that Vilan was unfamiliar with but had smelt it when they had taken his blood or given him shots. Zimmerman knew what it was however: rubbing alcohol but had no idea what the masked man could be doing with it. After all the recruits stood at attention around the kill zone staring at the masked man he spoke.

"Good evening privates," He still whispered despite that fact that all of them were awake. "My name is Bunny and I am the kill zone god." This caused the privates to exchanged glances. "And tonight you must pay tribute to me with either your sweat, blood or vomit. Front leaning rest position move." The recruits got into the push-up position and looked up at the masked man as he struck a match the flame glowing orange in the dark bay. "I am your god now please me." He let the match fall to the kill zone and started the alcohol on fire causing a ring of fire to form around the kill zone trapping Bunny in. He didn't seem to mind the flames however as the privates did push-ups by fire light. Once the flames had died down he had them do flutter kicks, grass hoppers, and back to push ups. They keep this up until 0213 when Bunny spoke again still whispering.

"Pay your tribute shake your faces over the kill zone," Bunny ordered. The privates did as instructed and after Bunny inspected each pool of sweat that had fallen from each recruits' head he seemed please. "You have pleased your god recover." The privates got to their feet most breathing heavily even Vilan seemed a little winded. "419 420 go to bed 421 and 422 your shift the rest of you go to bed." Bunny then walked out of the bay snapping his fingers in a steady rhythm. Now just about every recruit was thinking they had made a horrible mistake.

### 3. If it ain't raining

**\*\*Two weeks after Vilan's arrival to Charily Company.\*\***

Private Zimmerman watched the large drops of water fall from the bill of his patrol cap as he tried to stay perfectly still. He felt a shiver go down his spine, caused by wind mixed with the rain, as he shivered only once before he went back to the position of attention. Luckily he was in the back of the platoon formation and DI Willy couldn't see him as he addressed the formation. Only daring to move his eyes he looked over at the other platoons: first was kneeling under a clump of trees with second not too far away, third was still in a formation standing at attention as well but they themselves were under trees to give them some shelter from the rain. Willy had them form up right in the open and didn't even give them at ease as they were pelted by the heavy rain. It had started to rain early on and at

first Zimmerman didn't think it was going to be that bad, despite the wake up they had.

Willy had charged in, grabbed a recruit's rifle from the rack, loaded a magazine of blanks and fired them all off into the air. After everyone was toe to line he threw it at the private and told him to clean it. The news got better when he said they were skipping PT that morning to go on their first foot march. He then told them to pack their assault packs, the smaller ones about the size of a large backpack, with a clean uniform, change of socks, underwear and their poncho for it was going to rain. Then just before he left to let them change and perform barrack maintenance he said to make sure to have full canteens. They stepped off 35 minutes later after they had loaded empty magazines into their assault rifles. Instead of marching at 'port arms' like they were used to they marched holding them at the low ready. Instead of a normal formation it was columns of two along either side of a dark road. When large drops of the lukewarm water started to land on his cap he was sure they would stop and slip on their ponchos, but they never did.

As light started to break the recruits saw a large clearing blanketed in sand and full of different obstacles and every recruit knew what was coming. Once they had reached the clearing they formed up by platoon and Willy had them take their packs off and retrieve their ponchos. Zimmerman didn't necessarily see the point since they were already wet, but better late than never he guessed. Instead Willy had them lay their assault packs in front of them neatly and 'dress right dressed' then lay their rifles on top before covering it with their ponchos. Zimmerman then understood that the ponchos were to keep their gear dry not them. They ate a cold and wet breakfast of MREs, as it got brighter out. Then the other platoons got to kneel under cover but not them oh no they had to stand at the position of attention having been completely soaked to the bone. Zimmerman felt another shiver go down his spine and was unable to help but move a little as his body involuntary twitched.

Luckily Willy still couldn't see him since he was in the back and blessed with a little below average height. He didn't want to be that guy today, the private who gets the platoon punished. Most recruits had done it once with honest mistakes or left without an option. Yesterday DI George walked up to Hook and said:

"Hook you're so smart I got a question for you," He had said. Hook had just stared at him waiting. "Do I look like an asshole or a motherfucker to you?" Hook didn't know what to say and was thinking about what he could say when George screamed at him. "WELL WHICH IS IT HOOK?! MAKE A GODDAMN DECISION!" Hook chose asshole and got the platoon punished but no one held it against him. Not like Decker anyways. It had only been their first two weeks and the motherfucker had single handedly gotten the platoon punished more than the other recruits combined. He had left his wall locker unsecured and the DIs took his shaving cream and tooth paste and sprayed it all over the bay while knocking bunks over. It took them a whole hour to clean what took the DIs 15 minutes to wreck. Decker had done it twice and the second time wouldn't have been so bad if someone didn't loan him more shaving cream and toothpaste. That morning when he went to shave he asked to borrow some more, it was strange no one seemed to have any to lend.

Zimmerman stole a glance at Vilan to see him standing to his right

and like a statue the rain rolling off of him. Zimmerman had to hand it to the tall bastard he may have stuck out in formation but he hadn't moved an inch didn't even twitch the entire time they had been standing there. He would even bet if a fly landed in his eye he wouldn't lift a finger to remove it without being ordered to. Flicking his eyes forward again Zimmerman zoned back in on Willy's speech.

"So do you know what it tells me by raining today?" Willy asked wrapping up his speech. "Today of all days when we are going to run the obstacle course, when it hasn't rained yet since you've been here?" Willy paused more for effect then he did waiting for actually answers. "That god loves the crops. My saying: if it ain't raining you ain't training."

"Who is this god?" Vilan asked Zimmerman whisper out the side of mouth something that was very hard for him to do discreetly.

"A religious figure," Zimmerman whispered back.

"I supposed to now say it's not about winning," Willy explained. "But succeeding as a team. However you remember the first rule of this platoon? If you place last I swear to fucking god privates."

"Who is the fucking god?" Vilan asked Zimmerman dead serious. It was his serious tone that caused Zimmerman to snort out a short laugh before he caught himself.

"WHO THE FUCK WAS THAT?!" Willy demanded. "WHAT THE FUCK WAS SO FUNNY?!"

"It was me sir," Zimmerman said with a raise of his hand. "Private Zimmerman."

"AND WHAT THE FUCK WAS SO GODDAMN FUNNY ZIMMERMAN?" Willy shouted starring at him through the rest of the formation.

"Private Jones just asked me who the fucking god was sir," Zimmerman said wondering if he had sold out his bunkmate or not. Willy was taken back for the second time in his entire career as a drill instructor, both had been because of the Elite. The first time was when they recruits were getting their TA-50 issued to them: their armor, helmets, goggles with HUD, gas masks, ammo vests, tents, sleeping bags, assault packs, rucksacks and personal med kits. Every recruit would have to turn it back in after training so the next ones could use it. This meant most recruits had broken and stained gear that probable was lest then effective now. All except Vilan who got brand new gear because of his size, they made everything especially for him but he would be taking it with him instead of turning it in. Willy was going over how to use the helmets' built in radio when Vilan had spoken.

"Sir?" He had asked getting Willy's attention.

"What is it private?" Willy demanded but not angry yet.

"How do you activate the shields sir?" Vilan had asked being completely serious. Willy for the first time didn't know what to say if he would have been a smartass and asked the same question Willy would have jumped on him. It was because that he was serious and

honestly didn't know that caused Willy to halt and think before he answered.

"They don't have shields private," Willy simply said.

"I see sir," Vilan said. "Will the ones we get for battle have shields then sir?"

"These are the one for combat," Willy explained. "Expect they'll be newer like yours."

"They never have had shields?" Vilan asked confused now.

"No," Willy said and then continued about the radios. Vilan's respect for his father shout up a whole another level then. He already held him in high regards already be then to find out he survived all those battles without the aid of a shield made him even more of a better warrior in Vilan's eyes.

Now for the second time Willy didn't know what to say because Vilan really wanted to know who the fucking god was. Vilan had trouble understanding sarcasm but was starting to pick it up, however fuck was a word he still couldn't grasp. Mainly because the word confused him: it could be hot as fuck yet cold as fuck. Then you could do a nice fucking job, but just as easily you could do a \_nice \_fucking job. One could get fucked but then to one's enjoyment they could \_get \_fucked. So Vilan was stuck trying to understand a word that could mean and be so many things.

"YOU WANT TO KNOW WHO THE FUCKING GOD IS PRIVATE!?" Willy demanded recovering quickly. "I'M THE FUCKING GOD! OPEN RANKS MARCH!" The front rank took two full steps forward, the second took one step, the third didn't move and the fourth rank, the last rank, took one step back. Now there was a nice space between each ranks, and all the recruits knew what was coming next for they had gotten very used to this chain of commands.

"HALF RIGHT FACE!" Willy ordered. All the privates turned halfway to the right so the formation was standing diagonally now. "FRONT LEANING REST POSITION MOVE!" The privates assumed the position that Decker had caused them to become very familiar with. "DOWN...UP...DOWN...UP...DOWN...UP...HALF WAY DOWN...UP HALF WAY DOWN...UP DOWN UP DOWN UP DOWN UP DOWN UP DOWN UP! RECOVER!" The recruits got back to their feet hands covered in wet sand but they knew better to wipe them off, for it would only get them sent back down. "HALF LEFT FACE! CLOSED RANKS MARCH!" The formation was now back to the way it was, the rain slowly washing their hands.

"Speaking of gods," Willy said instantly clam again. "You know what you get if you win? A ribbon for our guidon." Willy explained speaking for the platoon's flag that a private named Wilson had to carry whenever they marched or ran as a formation. "You know who I've heard likes ribbons? Bunny." The entire formation felt their stomachs turns at the mention of the 'kill zone god's' name. They had meet him twice more one time at also been at night and he had demanded their sweat again before they could got back to sleep. The second, will really third time, they met him had been right after lunch. They were starting to get a little more time to eat and they were starting to eat fast so most were finishing their trays of food now. They had

walked into the bay, with pleasantly full bellies, to find Bunny standing in the kill zone. He had ordered them to rack their rifles and stand around his 'altar'. He then said he wanted their vomit in ordered to pay tribute. He then abused the recruits for an hour in a half until every last one had a pile of vomit in front of them. The last one to vomit was Vilan and he had to force himself to, which was something he didn't know he could do. That left 60 piles of vomit that had to be cleaned up and 60 empty bellies making for a very long next couple of hours.

"If you win that ribbon Bunny might just reward you," Willy explained. "Now just remember it's not who can complete the course the fastest but which platoon can complete it the fastest. The time doesn't stop until everyone is across the finish line. Understand?"\

"SIR YES SIR!" The formation shouted as the rain continued to pelt them. Drill Instructor George and Espenhover walked up to the formation.

"Unicorn," Espenhover said causing Willy to whip around.

"Who?" Willy breathed.

"Jackson," George said. Willy turned back around with something in his eyes the privates had never seen before.

"We're about to get a visit from the battalion commander," Willy explained. "If she asks you a question you are to answer it respectfully and honestly unless the honest answer will get you in trouble. If you embarrass me I swear to god I will smoke you until none of you can left your arms or feel your core." He then looked right at Vilan. "None of you."

"Gunny," Espenhover whispered. Willy turned around as a lieutenant colonel approached their formation.

"Platoon attention," Willy said bringing his hand up in a crisp salute. "Morning ma'am."

"Carry on," Lieutenant Colonel Jackson said returning the salute. "How's it going gunnery sergeant?"

"Just giving the platoon a pep talk before they run the course ma'am," Willy explained standing perfectly at attention.

"I see," Jackson said looking the formation over. "Gunnery sergeant I can't help but notice that all the other platoons have taken some kind of shelter from the rain expect yours why is that?"

"It was their idea ma'am," Willy said quickly and without hesitation. "They wanted to be out in the rain. Said they would already be getting wet and might as well speed up the process."

"Is that right?" Jackson asked eyeing Willy closely. "It this true privates?" Willy whipped around and gave the formation such a look that some felt their souls leave their bodies.

"MA'AM YES MA'AM!" The formation shouted with only a slight pause. Jackson's eyes then landed on Vilan since he stood well above the



rest of the recruits. "You must be Private Jones."

"I am ma'am," Vilan said.

"How do like the corps so far private?" Jackson asked. Vilan paused as he thought about his answer.

"I have enjoyed my time here very much ma'am," Vilan said.

"I don't think I have ever heard anyone use the word 'enjoyed' when they describe basic training," Jackson said with a small chuckle. "Carry on." She said turning around and going to inspect the other platoons. Willy turned to face his platoon.

"You did acceptable privates," Willy remarked. "Fall out and form up under those trees there." The privates were happy to get out of the rain but none of them really saw the point since all of them were soaked clean through. They then waited for a few hours while the other platoons finished. It took first platoon a shameful 37 minutes to finish and then second took even longer at 42. Third platoon finished at 23 minutes and finally fourth platoon stood lined up as it still continued to rain. The course was set up so there was 12 of every obstacle meaning after the first group completed an obstacle the next group could go so after five groups everyone would be through. Vilan was in the first group and waited excited to really prove the unimpressed Willy what he could really do. To his left stood his bunkmate Zimmerman, who flashed him a thumbs-up and toothy grin. The whistle blew and the recruits dove to the ground and started the first obstacle. A 100 meter high crawl through the wet sand. The high crawl was where they crawled on their elbows and knees "keeping their dick out of the dirt". Vilan sped through being the first one to reach the other side where he had to run in place while he waited for the rest of the group to finish.

The second recruit of the first group to make to the other side was Zimmerman who flashed Vilan a grin the front of his uniform covered in sand along with his knees and elbows. The rest of the recruits weren't far behind and soon the whistle sounded again signaling for the first group to move on to the second obstacle and the second group to begin. It was a short run up a hill to reach 12 sets of monkey bars. Here Vilan had to be careful because if his feet touched the ground he would be penalized, and he was tall enough that he could stand up and reach the bars and still stand on the ground. So he had to reach up and grab the first bar and tuck his knees up to his chest to keep his feet from touching the ground as he swung across. Vilan landed on the other side the first one done again but still on his heels was Zimmerman you smiled again at Vilan. The other recruits finished just a little behind Zimmerman and they heard the whistle to move to the next obstacle. Which was to climb a rope, ring a bell and climb back down. It was only 12 feet to the top and Vilan pretty much jumped up grabbed the rope didn't even climb it and rang the bell before dropping back down.

They moved on to the next challenge which was the classic staggered tires Vilan being the first to finish with Zimmerman right behind but now he was starting to get tired they all were expect for Vilan. Next they had to grab a rope and crawl along it to get across a shallow mud pit. After that they had to low crawl, which they had to lay completely on the ground and crawl through slimy thick mud. They had to go so far as to keep their heads in the mud as well, in fact if a

recruit came up without mud in his ear he had to go back and crawl through again. After that they ended up in a chest high trench, only going up to Vilan's waist. As Vilan and Zimmerman ran in place waiting for the others to caught up Vilan spoke to him.

"How is your stamina?" Vilan asked.

"I'm doing alright," Zimmerman said a little out of breath. "How are doing?"

"I am quite well," Vilan said.

"You sure you can keep up?" Zimmerman asked after getting at little of his breath back.

"I have been finishing each task before you I do not understand why you would oh-" Vilan said thinking about it. "That was a joke right?"

"Yes it was," Zimmerman said chuckling. The whistle sounded again and the first 12 jumped out of the trench and bear crawled for 100 meters before crawling through concrete tubes ankle deep in water. On the other side was the last obstacle an eight foot high concrete wall. Vilan reached it first and simply hopped up able to grab hold of the top and was about to pull himself up and over when he looked back and saw Zimmerman running at a slower pace and the rest of the group behind him. Vilan dropped back down and squatting down into a sitting position with his back against the wall. He then beckoned towards Zimmerman who ran with renewed energy.

"What is it?" Zimmerman asked out of breath again.

"Jump up," Vilan said patting his thighs then his shoulders. Zimmerman looked confused for half a second then he understood. He jumped up placing his feet on Vilan's thighs and then stepped up onto his shoulders able to easily reach the top of the wall now. He pulled himself up and over before hanging on the other side so he could drop down. Hook who was also in the first group saw what Zimmerman had done and approached Vilan carefully a little unsure.

"Do not be frightened," Vilan said. Getting the green light Hooked used Vilan to climb the wall as well. The other recruits in the group hurried over to Vilan as well. Following their progress from the side of the course was Drill Instructors Willy, George and Espenhover. Willy watched with hooded eyes and crossed arms but a smile was still present on his face for half a second before it was replaced by his trademarked scowl.

"What is it gunny?" Espenhover asked.

"The motherfucker is starting to get it," Willy explained pointing at Vilan as he help the last recruit over the wall before climbing it himself. "I think I know what I'm going to do with him."

"What's that?" Espenhover asked humoring Willy.

"Upon his graduation I'm going to recommend him for a ranger company," Willy explained.

"I don't know those rangers are a little...different," Espenhover

said. "They can make the ODSST assholes look tame and well mannered."

"I know but it would be a waste to send him to a regular infantry company," Willy explained. "I think Zimmerman might be able to hack it as well. I'll send them together make the adjustment easier on them." Espenhover just nodded.

"You know we'll be assigning student leadership next week," George said. "Think we could make him platoon guide?"

"No," Willy said. "I'm going to give it to Hook and make Jones a squad leader. Then when Hook fucks up I'll make him PG."

Meanwhile back on the course the first group was running in place on the other side of the wall waiting for the rest of the other groups to finish. Once the rest of the platoon was all on the other side of the wall the whistle blew for the last time and they ran for 150 meters to cross the finish line. First Sergeant Peterson was waiting with a stop watch and clicked it as the last private crossed the line.

"17 minutes 28 seconds," He announced as the recruits gasped and leaned on their knees. It seemed all those punishments and extra hard morning PT Willy put them through had paid off. As the victories forth platoon marched back to the start of the course the rest of the platoons gave them harsh or disappointed looks. They formed up out in the open as the rain started to wash the sand and mud from their uniforms. First Sergeant Peterson stood in front of their formation and tied the ribbon to their guidon as Wilson held it. They were handed more MREs for lunch and as they ate they didn't seem nearly as cold as the other platoons. Willy didn't say anything as he watch them eat which made Zimmerman nervous. After lunch they formed columns again and started to march back but forth platoons' packs were a little lighter, their feet a little less sore and their rifles a little easier to carry.

The company arrived at the barrack and sent back to their respective bays. Willy told his platoon to shower, wash their uniforms, change into PTs and have the bay spotless before he came back and got them for dinner. It was nice for the recruits to shower without someone watching over their shoulders for once. The bay was clean along with themselves and the last couple loads of uniforms were in the dryers when Willy came back. He rushed them out to the CTA were they marched by platoon to the mess hall. As well marched them he turned and addressed them.

"Alright I want this cadence to be loud," Willy ordered. "I want it to drown out the other platoons. High ho lock and load!"

"\_High ho lock and load!"\_

"The engines are running, we're ready to go!"

"\_The engines are running, we're ready to go!"\_

\_ "\_Kill the enemy take his soul!"

"\_Kill the enemy take his soul!"\_

"So early, so early, so early in the morning!"

"\_So early, so early, so early in the mornin\_g!"

"Pelicans flying high!"

"\_Pelicans flying high!"\_

"ODST fill the sky!"

"\_ODST fill the sky!"\_

"All will jump some will die!"

"\_All will jump some will die!"\_

"So early, so early, so early in the morning!"

"\_So early, so early, so early in the mornin\_g!"

"Scorpion on the hill!"

\_"Scorpion on the hill!"\_

"Tank commander's ready to kill!"

"\_Tank commander's ready to kill!"\_

"He gives the order to fire at will!"

"\_He gives the order to fire at will!"\_

"So early, so early, so early in the morning!"

"\_So early, so early, so early in the mornin\_g!"

"Sniper on the ground!"

"\_Sniper on the ground!"\_

"He creeps and crawls without making a sound!"

"\_He creeps and crawls without making a sound!"\_

"He locks and loads a single round!"

"\_He locks and loads a single round!"\_

"So early, so early, so early in the morning!"

"\_So early, so early, so early in the mornin\_g!" They reached the mess hall shortly after the cadence was complete. They ate their dinner and DI George marched them back still in high spirits until they made it back to the bay. Standing in the kill zone and waiting for them was Bunny. The recruits didn't wait for the order and circled around the kill zone and waited most thinking they were going to lose their dinner.

"So you ran the obstacle course today is that correct?" Bunny asked whispering. That was one of things that never sat well with them no

matter what he only spoke in a whisper.

"Yes Bunny," Zimmerman said on the platoon's behalf.

"I am also informed that you were the fastest platoon," Bunny said picking up a large box. "You have always paid your tribute and you winning the ribbon pleases me greatly. So I have gotten you a reward. Inside this box is the only thing that connects you to the outside world." The only way a recruit can stay in touch with friends and love ones is by writing letters by hand, on to paper and mailing them the old fashion way. Later on they might get a phone call home if their DIs thought they earned it. Bunny dug in the box and pulled out the first letter.

"Private Stone," Bunny said reading the name off the envelope.

"Here Bunny," Stone said raising his hand. Bunny flung the letter at him like a throwing star. It spun in the air and flew past his head the corner of the envelope nicking the side of his cheek drawing a thin line of blood. Stone didn't care as he bent down to grab something that might bring him the slightest bit joy.

"Private Hook," Bunny said holding up the next letter. When it was all said and done everyone had a least two letters some even more, expect for Vilan. This didn't really surprise him as he mother didn't really know that much English and couldn't write in English at all. So the next hour the privates spent reading their letters or writing their own back. Expect for Vilan who cleaned his rifle for the hundredth time even though they had yet to fire them. Later as Vilan and Zimmerman climbed into their bunks Zimmerman finally noticed he hadn't gotten a letter. Zimmerman felt a little selfish then after having gone blind when he saw the letter from his mother and father.

"Hey man I'm sure your letter just got a little loss in the mail," Zimmerman reassured his bunkmate.

"I'm sorry but you are mistaken," Vilan said hopping up to his bunk as the fire guard turned off the lights. "My mother can't write in human."

"Well what about your father?" Zimmerman asked not knowing Vilan's history.

"He was killed," Vilan explained.

"Oh man...I'm sorry," Zimmerman said. "Who was your father?"

"Good night Zimmerman," Vilan said closing his eyes.

"Good night," Zimmerman feeling more like an ass then he had to begin with.

#### 4. I can smell sound

**\*\*Two days later.\*\***

Vilan could hear Zimmerman breathing and knew he was panicking. He could tell by the way he was taking very quick and shallow breaths,

Vilan didn't know the word for what Zimmerman was doing was hyperventilating. Vilan could hear all this even through the gas masks that each of them wore pressed to their faces. Although Vilan's was custom built so it would fit on his face and still allow him to talk.

"Relax my friend," Vilan said placing a hand on Zimmerman's shoulder as he stood in front of him. "The mask you wear will cause you to lose consciousness if you continue to breathe like that."

"I know. I know," Zimmerman's voice muffled by the mask. Vilan watched him until his breathing was under control again. "This is just the one thing I haven't been looking forward to is all."

"The gas they use for this exercise can't kill you," Vilan explained tilting Zimmerman's chin up so he could inspect the mask's seals.

"I know," Zimmerman said heavily. "This is just the one thing I have been dreading." Vilan let Zimmerman lower his head again and this time pressed his palm over Zimmerman's filter so it was completely covered.

"Can you breathe?" Vilan asked. Zimmerman quickly shook his head indicating he couldn't. "Good." Vilan said removing his claw allowing Zimmerman to breathe again. The reason Vilan did this was to completely ensure Zimmerman's mask was sealed to his face, if he had been able to breathe while Vilan had covered the filter it would have meant he was drawing air into the mask that wasn't being filtered. Satisfied with Zimmerman Vilan side stepped to inspect the next recruit in the line: Private Decker. Vilan had him look up to visually inspect his seals as well before covering his filter and asking if he could breathe. He couldn't and Vilan had the sudden urge to keep his hand there and let the bastard suffocate for what he had put the platoon through, but he quickly removed his hand as the urge passed. Vilan then noticed his helmet's chin strap hung from his helmet.

"Decker," Vilan said grabbing the strap between two long fingers. "You forgot to secure your helmet again. If Willy saw that he would punish me again."

"Oh," Was all Decker said as Vilan secured it to the other side of his helmet and pulled it tight from him. With a slight shake of his head Vilan moved onto the last recruit in the line Private Stone. After he made sure his mask was secured and sealed Vilan double checked his own, he did an about face and saluted, at least the best his claw could form.

"Platoon guide," Vilan said addressing Hook. "Fourth squad is ready."

"Very good squad leader," Hook said returning Vilan's salute. They had ran the obstacle course on Saturday and on Sunday, the only day they somewhat got off, DI Willy had barraged in and announced that next week (meaning Monday) they would be assigning student leadership. He however was assigning them now. He then made Hook platoon guide and gave him a large arm band that had a gunnery sergeant rank emblem on it. He then called up Valentine, Smith, Thompson and Vilan and made them squad leaders after handing them their arm bands with staff sergeant ranks on them. He then broke up the remaining recruits

into four squads and put Decker into Vilan's squad. He then explained that if a recruit fucked up he would punish the squad leader and the PG instead. Decker then left his towel in the showers that same night and Vilan had to do sprints up and down the stairs outside the barrack until he about passed out. The other recruits had never seen him like that, and it had taken Willy two hours but he had broken the Elite. The other recruits' morale dropped after see someone break they never thought would.

Now as Vilan dropped his salute he started to feel the same hate for Decker as the rest of the platoon.

"Third squad just got finished with the chamber," Hook explained. "March then over there you'll receive orders from the DIs then."

"Understood," Vilan said his already deep voice made deeper by his gas mask. He then did an about face so he could address his squad. "Group attention. Right face. Port arms." The recruits brought their rifles up and held them six inches from their chests. "Forward march. Left...left...left...left, right...right...right... right, left. See the covenant dressed in red!"

"\_See the covenant dressed in red!\_"

"He is the one with the bullet in his head!"

"\_He is the one with the bullet in his head!\_"

"I am the one he did not see! Queen of the battle MC in-fan-try!"

"\_I am the one he did not see! Queen of the battle MC in-fan-try!"  
\_

"See the covenant dressed in black!"

"\_See the covenant dressed in black!\_"

"He is the one with the knife in his back!"

"\_He is the one with the knife in his back!\_"

"I am the one he did not see! Queen of the battle MC in-fan-try!"

"\_I am the one he did not see! Queen of the battle MC in-fan-try!"  
\_

"See the covenant dressed in white!"

"\_See the covenant dressed in white!\_"

"He is the one that's in my sights!"

"\_He is the one that's in my sights!\_"

"I am the one he cannot see! Queen of the battle MC in-fan-try!"

"\_I am the one he cannot see! Queen of the battle MC

in-fan-try!"\_

"Left...left...left...left, right...right...right...right, left," Vilan went back to just keeping time for two reasons. The first was that cadence didn't sound to good when everyone was wearing gas masks. The second was Vilan could see the entrance to the chamber and Willy and George standing near it. He marched them so they were in front of their DIs. "Group halt." Vilan ordered. The small formation took one more step with their right foot and then brought up their left foot up even with their right everyone coming to a complete and smart looking stop at once. "Order arms. Left face. Sir fourth squad ready for duty."

"Very good squad leader," Willy said. "If there is anything you wish to do or tell your squad I would do it now."

"Yes sir," Vilan said and then went down the line and pressed his palm over each of their filters again to ensure they were still sealed. He then stood in front of the formation. "When the time comes to remove the masks do not make the mistake for trying to hold your breath. After you can't any longer you will be forced to take a deep breath and your lungs will full with the gas. Instead as soon as it is removed take short shallow breaths."

"WHO THE FUCK TOLD YOU TO DO THAT?!" Willy demanded causing Vilan to whip around to face him.

"No one sir," Vilan explained. "Just what I heard from the other recruits that tried to hold their breath and thought this would be the best way to counter it sir."

"I see," Willy said pulling his own mask from a pouch strapped to his left thigh. "March 'em in." Vilan marched fourth squad of fourth platoon into the small gas chamber and had them line up with their backs against the left wall, before taking his place in the line as well. When Vilan had entered he had noticed nothing out of the ordinary but his skin started to tingle and burn slightly.

"Alright," Willy said with his own mask on his face now. "I know you can't tell but there is already gas inside of here. Since you're not hacking your heads off that means your mask is working. Now do you know what is the best thing about being the last of the last?"

"Sir no sir!" The recruits shouted.

"Normal each group only had about two to four canisters of gas opened in here," Willy explained. "But you are the last group and we still have seven canisters left over and we can't turn them back in. Well we can it just is a lot easier to use them all." He then pulled the pin on two canister and a white smoke bellowed from both of them. It quickly seemed to dissipate as the room didn't seem smoky or hazy, but Vilan noticed that his skin started to burn a little more. Willy pulled the pin on a third canister and as it smoked he spoke again.

"I'm going to stand in front of each of you and when I do you are going to pull your mask over your nose and state: your rank, name and last four. Then you may put it back on and reseal it. Got it?" Willy explained.



"Sir yes sir," Came the reply in unison. Willy then started with Vilan and stood in front of him and looked up waiting. Vilan lifted the mask off of his face and his nose was assaulted by the gas that filled the room. The smell was strong and sharp, it also burned the inside of his nose.

"Private Jones. 4,8-" By then the gas had snuck passed his tongue and slipped into his throat until it embedded itself into his lungs. When it did his body wanted to get rid of it right away so he broke into a coughing fit. He managed to take his own advice however and after his fit he took a shallow breath allowing only a same portion of the gas into his lungs. This prevented him from breaking into another fit. But when he tried to finish his last four he broke out into another coughing fit.

"Close enough private get your mask back on," Willy ordered moving to the next private in line. Vilan pressed the mask back to his face and pulled the straps tight resealing the mask to his face. However there was still a cloud of gas that had gotten sealed inside the mask. Vilan covered his filter and drew a breath in. As no air was allowed in through the filter Vilan sucked in all the poised air inside the mask and then forced it out. This caused him to almost cough again, which would have unsealed the mask and force him to start the process all over again. He fought the urge however and removed his hand from his filter so he could breathe clean air again. After a few breaths of that the urge quickly passed but his nose and throat still stung but it was already starting to pass. Willy had already gone over to the next private who was forced to do the same and resale his mask as Vilan had done. Willy went down the line some getting their whole rank, name and last four out, other not even close. Until he reached Zimmerman. When Willy stood in front of him he didn't move to take his mask off.

"Well private!" Well shouted as loud as he could through his mask. Zimmerman slowly started to bring a hand up to remove but it was too slow for Willy. He ripped Zimmerman's mask from his face and threw it across the chamber, where it landed against a wall. Zimmerman's, who had been taking a full breath at the time, lungs filled with the gas. He immediately started to cough, no he started to hack his head off. After all the air was forced out of his lungs he let his body take over which wanted him to take a deep and full breath to replace all the air in his lungs at once. When he did he sucked even more of the gas in and he started to hack once again. On the third time Zimmerman dropped to his knees in a desperate attempt to breath clean air, still unable to stop coughing.

"I CAN'T BREATHE!" Zimmerman screamed before breaking into more coughs.

"Get a hold of yourself private!" Willy shouted. "If you can scream you can breathe!" Zimmerman wasn't having any of it however as he continued to cough.

"I CAN'T BREATHE!" He screamed again falling to his hands so he was on all fours.

"Alright get your mask back on private!" Well shouted moving to the next private in line. Zimmerman's eyes stung, his throat and lungs burned and every breath he drew pained him. Because of this he

couldn't think straight.

"I CAN'T FIND MY MASK!" Zimmerman screamed scrambling around on his hands and knees in a desperate and futile attempt to find his gas mask. Vilan who couldn't stand to see his bunkmate and squad member reduced to that broke ranks and made a bee line for Zimmerman's mask. Willy saw him break ranks and turned to face him.

"Get back into ranks private!" Willy ordered.

"I must retrieve his mask sir," Vilan said.

"He has to find it himself!" Willy shouted through his mask. Vilan looked at Zimmerman as he dry heaved crawling around on his hands and knees, mucus flowing freely from his nose and knew there was no way he was going to find it.

"He is in no state of mind to find it sir," Vilan protested.

"I don't fucking care!" Willy shouted. "If he suffers he suffers alone!" Vilan took one last look at Zimmerman as he dry heaved again a thick yellow slimmed spat from his mouth and onto the floor. Vilan made for the discarded mask again.

"Private if you touch that mask I'll smoke you till you pass out!" Willy warned.

"Only me?" Vilan asked. Willy seemed a little taken back but crossed his arms as he squared up with Vilan.

"Yes only you squad leader," Willy said something different in his voice. Vilan picked up Zimmerman's mask and went over where he crawled still looking for it. Vilan knelt down and pulled Zimmerman up into a sitting position and handed him the mask. Zimmerman grabbed at it like a drowning man grabs for anything that floats. He tried to seal it to his face but he coughed again followed closely by a dry heave and the mask fell to the floor again. Vilan picked it up and pressed it to Zimmerman's face holding it in place for him this time. Zimmerman tried to breathe but he forgot to clear and seal the mask and only sucked in more gas causing him to cough more, the force of the cough unsealing the mask.

"You have to clear the mask," Vilan explained as Zimmerman continued to cough with the mask pressed to his face. Zimmerman didn't hear him, he couldn't as he panicked and he still coughed and dry heaved. Vilan pressed the mask to Zimmerman's face even tighter and with his free hand covered Zimmerman's filter for him.

"Breathe Zimmerman," Vilan ordered. "Breathe." Zimmerman still didn't hear Vilan but as he sucked in the last of the gas and forced it out with a light cough this time the mask was finally clear. He next breath was of filtered clear air as Vilan removed his hand from the filter. Zimmerman's breathing started to clam as more clean air started to fill his lungs.

"Breathe my friend," Vilan said as Zimmerman started to clam. As Zimmerman's coughing got quieter Vilan pulled the masks straps back onto his head and pulled them tight so he could remove his hand. After Zimmerman had stopped coughing completely Vilan helped him to his feet. "You alright now?" Vilan asked placing a hand on

Zimmerman's back.

"Yeah I'm good now," Zimmerman said weakly Vilan barely able to hear him through the mask. "Thanks." Vilan just nodded as he took a step back from Zimmerman and handed him his rifle he had picked up from the floor.

"Take your place in ranks squad leader," Willy ordered. Vilan couldn't tell because of his mask but he thought, instead of sounding angry Willy almost sounded pleased. Vilan returned to his place in line. "Ok now that's over it's time for the real fun. When I give the order you are to hold your rifle between your legs with your knees, un-strap your helmet, place it on the barrel of your rifle, take your mask completely off, put your helmet back on re-strap it and then hold your rifle in your right hand and with your mask in your left hand. If your rifle or helmet touch this floor you will be coming back in here, or if your helmet is not strapped. Also none of you are leaving until everyone is like that. Understood?"

"Sir yes sir!" The group shouted. Willy then opened all four remaining canisters at once.

"Take off your fucking masks!" Willy ordered. Vilan placed his rifle between his knees and bent as far over as he could without the rifle falling over, cursing he own height. He un-strapped his helmet and carefully placed it on his rifle before gripping his mask with both his claws. He took a few more breaths of filtered air before he ripped it off his face. Taking the short shallow breaths he had recommended he placed the mask under his armpit and placed the helmet back on his head. He coughed lightly a few times as he ensured the chin strap was not twisted as he fastened it the other side of his helmet. That complete he grabbed his mask with his left hand and rifle with his right and held his arms out to the side. Vilan coughed only slightly as he continued to take shallow breath and risked a look back at Zimmerman. Able to prepare himself this time he coughed lightly but he was in control this. Vilan looked straight ahead again as mucus started to flow from his own nose now. His lungs started burn however after prolonged exposed to the gas even in small amounts.

"Come on Decker the squad's waiting on you!" Willy shouted. Vilan whipped around to see that Decker had his rifle between his knees and his helmet was on it but he still wore his mask. A loud and full cough grabbed Vilan's attention next. It had came from Zimmerman who then had a few light coughs followed by a dry heave and louder coughs. He got himself under control but Vilan knew he was losing it and it wouldn't be long till he was back on the ground like earlier. Decker still hadn't removed his yet and Vilan had enough of the screw up for one day. Vilan with a heavy cough himself marched over to Decker, ripped his mask off, shoved it into his left hand, slammed his helmet on his head and yanked the strap as tight as he could. Decker picked up his rifle as he started to cough himself then. That complete Vilan marched back to the front of the line and waited for Willy's order.

"Right face," Willy said his mask still filtering his air. The squad made a very sloppy right face as their skin and eyes burned. "Now get the fuck out of my gas chamber!" Vilan marched to the door and threw it open emerging into the sunlight. He took a deep breath of clean air and coughed the remaining gas out of his lungs. The rest of the

squad was doing the same the front of their uniforms wet from mucus that had leaked out of their noses. Vilan made his way over to Zimmerman as he hacked the last bit of gas out of his own lungs.

"How are you my friend?" Vilan asked.

"I'm just peachy," Zimmerman said straighten back up.

"You are a fruit?" Vilan asked cocking his head to the side.

"Never mind," Zimmerman said with a wave of his hand. "At least that gas cleared up my sinus." Vilan took a deep breath through his nose and realized that Zimmerman was right, and looked down and could see why. All the mucus that would have been in his nose was on the front of his uniform.

"You are right," Vilan remarked.

"Yeah I think I can smell sound," Zimmerman joked.

"How?" Vilan asked not realizing it was a joke.

"Never mind again," Zimmerman said with another wave of his hand.

"Oh squad leader could you come here for a minute?" Willy asked walking out of the gas chamber still wearing his mask as gas bellowed out behind him. Taking a deep breath Vilan walked over to where Willy stood with his head held high.

"Sir Private Jones reporting as ordered sir," Vilan said saluting.

"Do you mind telling me why you willfully disobeyed a lawful order?" Willy asked removing his mask.

"Sir when you made me squad leader you told me I was responsible for the recruits in my squad," Vilan explained. "I saw a recruit that I was responsible for in need of assistance and I assisted him."

"Even after I ordered you not to?" Willy asked crossing his arms.

"Sir if me receiving punishment for helping a fellow marine is the price I have to pay so be it," Vilan said expanding his chest.

"Your wrong about one thing," Willy said. "Private Zimmerman isn't a marine yet. Now hand me your rifle private." Vilan did as instructed and handed Willy his rifle who chucked it back into the gas chamber. "GO GET IT PRIVATE!" Willy screamed. Vilan started to pull his mask back on but Willy ripped it out of his hands and chucked into the chamber as well. Vilan took a couple off deep breaths, holding in the last one and was about to charge in when Zimmerman, already wearing his mask, ran into the chamber. Vilan didn't see because he was to stun as Zimmerman blew past him, but Willy had a smirk on his face for the entire time Zimmerman was in the chamber. As soon he return his wore a scowl again however. Zimmerman handed Vilan his rifle and mask back before he stood in front of Willy and saluted. Willy placed his hands on his hips and shook his head in mock

disappointment.

"GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY SIGHT!" Willy screamed and the two recruits ran as fast as they could.

"So how'd it go?" Espenhover asked Willy.

"Well Private Jones just learned that sometimes you have to do the wrong thing to do the right thing," Willy explained. "Then Private Zimmerman learned that CS gas fucking sucks."

"Is that all he learned?" Espenhover asked.

"Well that and putting his personal discomforts out of the way for the good of the unit," Willy admitted. "In short taking one for the team."

"So they did good then?" Espenhover asked crossing his arms.

"Yeah they did good," Willy admitted. "But they can't know that."

So as the company marched by platoon the long way back to the barrack Vilan and Zimmerman had to run around the fourth platoon formation with their rifles held above their heads the entire way back.

## 5. What is that Private Decker?

**\*\*10 days after the NBC chamber.\*\***

Vilan grunted in disgust as the sixth live round in a row slipped from his claw as he tried to load it into his magazine. His mandibles twisted into a sneer as he attempted to load a seventh but this one also slipped out of his claw as he tried to push it into the magazine.

"May your offspring be born blind!" Vilan shouted in his native tongue louder than he wanted to.

"I don't know what you just said but it couldn't have been nice," A voice said. Vilan looked up from his three frustrating magazines and 40 infuriating rounds, to see Zimmerman walking down from the shooting platform.

"I told this...magazine to have blind offspring," Vilan said holding up the magazine he had been working on. He had spent 15 minutes on that one magazine and only managed to load nine rounds.

"You know that it's an inanimate object?" Zimmerman asked slinging his rifle across his back. "Allow me." Zimmerman plucked the semi-full mag from Vilan's hand and started to quickly and efficiently thumb the rounds into the magazine.

"Thank you," Vilan said as Zimmerman finished loading 20 rounds into the first magazine and started with the second.

"You know it's funny. You can run a mile in four minutes, which is really fucking fast," Zimmerman explained using that word that confused Vilan so. "But you can't load rounds into magazines." Vilan opened and closed his claws as he watched Zimmerman load the

rounds.

"That is one of the reasons we do not use projectile weapons," Vilan explained.

"I see," Zimmerman said finishing the second magazine and starting with the third and final. "So now that you're a squad leader I don't have to pull fire guard anymore right?" Zimmerman looked up and smiled as big as he could manage showing all his teeth.

"Only if in return I receive monetary compensation," Vilan said accepted the two 10 round magazines and one 20 round mag from Zimmerman. Zimmerman looked up at Vilan his smile gone, not believing that by the book, super marine recruit Vilan Jones was going to do something so uncharacteristic. As Zimmerman stared with his mouth agape, Vilan's mandibles slowly twisted into a grin. After seeing that Zimmerman also started to grin.

"Holy shit did you just make a joke?" Zimmerman asked.

"Indeed I did," Vilan said.

"Atta boy," Zimmerman said slapping him on the side of the arm. "Nice to see you loosening up a little bit."

"New shooters to the line," A voice over the range's PA said.

"I must depart now," Vilan said picking up his rifle.

"Yeah good luck," Zimmerman said walking away. Vilan walked up the small hill to the shooting platform. Which was little more than a wooden platform, with a sloped roof over head that was half a foot off the ground so the recruits didn't have to lay in the dirt. Vilan took up a good prone position and moved a pair of sandbags in front of him so he could rest his rifle on them. He then lined up the loaded magazines neatly next to him with in arms reach. He looked to his left and right and could see the other recruits doing similar things on the other lanes. He turned his attention back to his lane, lane 23, and the various dirt brims at different ranges. The past week and a half had all been about practicing basic rifle marksmanship. Every day Willy had them on the floor of the bay practicing getting a good sight picture, breath control and trigger squeeze for hours on end. When they weren't doing that they were in the platoon classroom learning all their was to know about their rifles, how bullets travel, and basic effects of gravity on projectiles. Now it was time to see if all that training had paid off.

"Shooters lock and load your 20 round magazine," The PA ordered. Vilan locked the bolt on his rifle back and picked up the magazine Zimmerman had loaded 20 of his 40 rounds into. He shoved it into the rifles lower receiver until he heard a metallic click, then slapped the bolt release. The bolt snapped forward chambering the first round, the ammo counter that for so long always read 0 now read 20. The action of loading his rifle with live ammunition was very satisfying to Vilan. He pressed the rifle's butt firmly into his right shoulder as he had practiced so many times as his right finger rested lightly on the trigger.

"Rotate your selector switch from safe to semi and watch your lane,"

The PA said crackling to life. Vilan used the thumb on his right hand to place the weapon on semi, a hardly used function outside of basic training every marine usually preferring to keep the weapon on auto. The first target popped up shortly after the PA's announcement, a humanoid silhouette of a head and shoulder at 50 meters. Vilan quickly shifted aiming center mass lining up first the front sight then the rear sight. He took a short breath in then exhaled it and on the pause between breaths he evenly and gently squeezed the trigger. The rifle's buffer made it so he felt almost no recoil, but he heard the crack of the shot and out of the corner of his eye he saw the cycling bolt eject the spent shell casing as the counter changed from 20 to 19. Before the shot's echo had completely died down the target dropped back behind the brim, indicting he had hit it. This all happen in less than two seconds as Vilan switched his aim to the middle of the lane again opening his left eye again. Vilan heard other cracks in quick secession as the other recruits fired at their targets and the few lingering cracks as a few recruits took longer to aim. The next target popped up this time it was a head, shoulders and torso at 100 meters. Vilan repeated the same steps and the target dropped shortly after he fired meaning he had scored another hit. Then to make things a little harder two targets popped up at once, one at 100 meters the other at 150. Vilan dropped then both started with the closer target first.

This continued for 20 targets at ranges from 50 to 300 meters. Every once in awhile Vilan would hear to very quick shots and then maybe a swear from either lane 22 or 24 meaning the recruit had missed and decide to try again with an another round. Vilan fired at the target at 200 meters it dropping as Vilan's bolt locked back and the ammo counter read 0 once again.

"Lock and clear all weapons," The PA ordered. Vilan pressed the magazine release and pulled out the empty magazine and tossed it aside. He then flexed his fingers as he lowered the rifle from his shoulder. "Shooters take up a good kneeling position and lock and load your first 10 round magazine." Vilan did as instructed and placed his right knee on the ground moving his right foot so he was sitting on it. He inserted one of the 10 round mags into his rifle and hit the bolt release the counter now reading 10. He moved his left leg so his left knee was right in front of him. Pressing the rifle back into his shoulder he rested his left elbow, his left hand was holding the front of his rifle, on his left knee taking most of the burden from his arm.

"Rotate your selector switch from safe to semi and watch your lane," The PA said repeating the instructions from earlier. This time targets only popped up at the 50, 75 and 100 meter ranges. After a very short 10 targets and rounds Vilan's bolt locked back on a empty magazine once again. The PA then told them to move to a steady standing position and load their last 10 round magazine. Then targets at the same ranges at the kneeling popped up and after Vilan's bolt locked back a third time the PA told them to lock and clear their weapons and leave the range to receive their scores. Vilan removed the empty mag and placed them back in his vest, locked his bolt forward and safetied his rifle before walking along the dirt path to the range entrance/exit. Once he was off the range, after his rifle was check by a DI to ensure no rounds were still in it he found the marker on the ground that read 23 and stood on it. All 40 recruits that just shot were in a line standing on the number of their lane as First Sergeant Peterson got the sheet with their scores on it and

started walking down the line announcing their scores.

"Lane one: 20 unqualified, lane two: 17 unqualified, lane three: eight...Are you fucking kidding me private?!" Peterson demanded.

"I do better next time sir," The private stammered.

"You better you only have two more weeks until qualification," Peterson said. "Lane four: 22 marksmen, barely. Lane five: 30 sharpshooter well done son."

"Thank you sir," The private said with a self satisfied smirk on his face. Peterson continued down the line stopping in front of Vilan.

"Lane 23: 40. Holy fucking shit," Peterson remarked looking up at the Elite. "All 40 targets, we have a goddamn Hawkeye, on his first try no less out fucking standing. Make sure you shoot like that on qual. day."

"I will sir," Vilan said pride welling up in his chest. After all the scores had been read it was just about noon and the privates were told to go back to their platoon areas to eat lunch. As Vilan walked back DI Willy started to walk next to him.

"Just keep walking private," Willy ordered. Vilan nodded letting Willy know he understood. "I heard you shot Hawkeye. Good job."

"Thank you sir," Vilan said a little uneasy for DIs never complemented anyone epically Willy.

"Remember what I said about your unit is only as strong as your weakest member?" Willy asked.

"Yes sir," Vilan said his mind flashing to Decker.

"Good because I have a proposal for you," Willy said placing his hands behind his back. "If you shoot Hawkeye on qual. day and your squad all qualify first time go I'll give the platoon a phone call home. However you're not allowed to tell them about our deal, understand?"

"Sir yes sir!" Vilan said very cheerfully. Everyone had been talking about how they would give anything for a phone call home.

"Good now carry on private," Willy said walking away. Vilan walked over to where Hook had formed up fourth platoon. Everyone was in formation expect of Hook and the squad leaders and after Vilan joined Hook and the other squad leaders everyone was accounted for.

"Alright second and fourth rank about face," Hook ordered. First and second rank were now back to back as were third and fourth. "Take seats." The formation sat on the ground with crossed legs their backs pressed against a fellow recruit's back, to make themselves slightly more comfortable. "Aright squad leaders get a count and get the MREs passed out." Vilan went to the fourth rank, fourth squad, and got a count of the number of recruits. Still 13, 14 when he counted himself. He went over to where they kept the boxes of MREs and picked



up a full box of 12 and a two more loose ones. Vilan read the writing on the side of the box: \_Menu set B entrees 12-24. \_He had memorized all the entrees and knew that number 20 was tuna which nobody liked, in fact Wilson had vomited after eating it. Vilan didn't mind it however and would eat it so no one else would have to deal with it. He was also supposed to pass 'em out at random but along with memorizing the entrees he had memorized the order in which they were stacked in the box and which were favored by the recruits in his squad. Granted some entrees were favored by more than one recruit so Vilan would alternate who got what. Vilan passed out the MREs taking the tuna for himself and taking a seat in the front of fourth rank placing his back against Private Thompson's back, the third squad leader. All the privates now held their MREs in their laps waiting. Drill Instructor Willy strolled over to where fourth platoon sat.

"Report PG," Willy ordered. Hook did an about face and saluted.

"Sir fourth platoon is formed up and ready for chow sir," Hook said.

"Very well private fall in," Willy ordered. Hook dropped his salute grabbed his own MRE and ran and took his place in the formation. "And begin." The recruits ripped open the MREs and dumped their contents on the ground. They scrambled around looking for the entree packet and chemical heater. They placed the packet into the heater and added water to start the reaction and warm the packet. As it did most started to eat their side dishes and snacks.

"Anyone got M&Ms they don't want?" Private Decker called from down the line. The one good thing about eating MREs everyday for lunch was that they got to eat whatever the desserts was as long as they ate it then. Vilan picked up the brown bag of candy he had gotten in his MRE, he didn't like the way they got stuck in his teeth so he was ok with parting with them.

"Decker," Vilan said tossing him the bag of M&Ms. Decker caught them in mid air and mumbled something along the lines of thanks.

"So how'd you do?" Zimmerman asked sitting next to Vilan his mouth full of peanut butter and crackers.

"How did \_you\_ fair my friend?" Vilan asked starting to feel a little awkward with how well he was fairing in basic training while the other struggled.

"Hey now I asked you first," Zimmerman said. "But I got 28 only need to hit two more and I'll be sharpshooter."

"You realize you have to do that well on qualification day?" Vilan asked taking the tuna packet out of the heater.

"I know smart ass," Zimmerman said using his shoulder to shove Vilan. "Now quiet stalling how'd you do?"

"I hit 40 targets," Vilan said opening the packet and using the plastic spoon that came with the MRE shoved some into his mouth.

"All fucking 40?" Zimmerman gasped. "That's the way to fucking do

it." Vilan nodded as the two ate in silence for a few seconds when Zimmerman thought he'd try what he had started awhile ago, but with a different approach. "So a few of my good friends are marines. They're the ones that convinced me it was a good idea to enlist in a time of war."

"Will these friends still be your friends when this is over?" Vilan asked tiny bits of tuna falling from his mouth.

"That has yet to be determined," Zimmerman chuckled. Here he paused as he prepared to ask the question. "So why'd you decide to enlist into the corps?" Vilan and Zimmerman didn't know it but all the recruits that were near them ears perked up as they had been wondering the same thing.

"I wanted to be a marine like my father was," Vilan said as if nothing could be more natural.

"Oh," Zimmerman said a little disappointed at the simple answer. "I thought you were the first."

"The first what?" Vilan asked finishing the last of his tuna.

"You know," Zimmerman explained. "The first Elite marine."

"What is an Elite?" Vilan asked confused now.

"It's what you are," Zimmerman said starting to feel a little uncomfortable.

"You are mistaken my friend," Vilan said with a deep chuckle. "I am a Sangheili."

"I know it just that...Elite was the name we gave to your kind," Zimmerman explained. "Like a nickname."

"I see," Vilan said thinking over what Zimmerman had said. "And I am."

"Am what?" Zimmerman asked opening his packet of spaghetti with meat sauce his favorite.

"The first Sangheili marine," Vilan explained stuffing his trash back into the MRE's pouch.

"But your father?" Zimmerman asked becoming confused now.

"What about him?" Vilan asked.

"You said he was a marine," Zimmerman said trying to put the pieces together.

"He was," Vilan said now confused again wondering where Zimmerman was going with this.

"But you said you are the first Sangheili marine," Zimmerman stated.

"Indeed I am," Vilan said looking at Zimmerman. It suddenly clicked for Zimmerman then. He felt so stupid to only realize it now. How

Private Jones didn't have the double knees like most of his kind, how he was able to enlist into the UNSCMC, how he was short for his kind since most male Sangheilis were eight 'n' a half feet to nine feet tall. Not to mention the last name of Jones. Zimmerman's eyes widened and his mouth slightly dropped at his epiphany.

"Jones who was your father?" Zimmerman asked carefully remembering when he had tired a few weeks ago. Every recruit in fourth platoon ears now burned waiting to hear Vilan's answer as they had all been eavesdropping now. Vilan realized he had said to much and fell quiet dropping his gaze to the dirt.

"A very honorable warrior," Vilan said choosing his words carefully.

"I see," Zimmerman said dropping his own gaze and thought carefully about his next question when Willy came back over.

"Alright you're done," Willy said. "I don't want to see any trash in this area what so ever, even if it has been buried here for two fucking years." The recruits picked up their trash and threw it back into the MRE boxes. As Zimmerman threw his MRE back into the box he had a thought. His marine 'friends' stilled owed him a favor or two and one worked in payroll so he could get into personal records. Maybe he'd write him a letter tonight. After the trash was picked up the recruits went back to training, either shooting on the range or practicing BMR skills as they waited to go to the range. The entire company got to go three more times through the range. Zimmerman scoring: 27, 26 and then 29 while Vilan shot: 40, 39 and 40. As the sun started to go down they were loaded onto buses and driven back to the barrack where they ate dinner at the mess hall and afterwards fourth platoon stood toe to line as Willy, George and Espenhover inspected their wall lockers, bunks and uniforms. Things were going pretty well until Willy got to Decker. His bunk was tight and wrinkle free and his wall locker was to SOP, Vilan had made sure of that, that morning.

"Water check!" Willy suddenly shouted and ripped one of Decker's canteens from his belt and shook it checking how full it was. However instead of the sloshing of water there was a strange rattling. "WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT PRIVATE!?" Willy screamed leaning in so the brim of his hat was touching Decker's forehead as he shook the canteen next to Decker's ear.

"I don't know sir," Decker said.

"YOU DON'T FUCKING KNOW!?" Willy shouted leaning back. "WELL LET'S FIND OUT SHALL WE?!" Willy unscrewed the cap and upended the canteen. Brightly colored dots fell to the floor and scattered. "WHAT THE FUCK ARE THOSE PRIVATE DECKER!?" Willy demanded.

"M&Ms sir," Decker said.

"ARE M&MS ALLOWED IN THE BARRACK!?" Will demanded the front of his hat touching Decker's forehead again.

"Sir no sir!" Decker said. "But it was Private Jones who gave them to me."

"PRIVATE JONES IS THIS TURE?!" Willy shouted not breaking eye contact

with Decker.

"Sir I did give them to him during lunch chow," Vilan explained. "I was not aware this was his intent."

"PRIVATE DECKER YOU MAKE ME FUCKING SICK!" Willy screamed. "FIRST YOU FUCKED UP THEN TIRED TO PASS THE BLAME OFF TO SOMEONE ELSE! YOU CAN'T EVEN TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR OWN FUCKING ACTIONS! HOWEVER YOU REMEMBER HOW I SAID IF ONE FUCKS UP YOU ALL FUCK UP?! PRIVATE JONES FRONT AND CENTER!" Vilan ran over to where Willy stood. Willy rip Vilan's arm band that had the staff sergeant rank on it from his arm. Vilan had been expecting this, what he didn't expect was him walking over to Hook removing his armband and shoving Vilan's into his hand. He then walked back over to Vilan and shoved it into his chest. "PRIVATE JONES YOU ARE NOW PLATOON GUIDE! THIS IS YOUR MESS CLEAN IT UP! I WANT BUNKS AND WALL LOCKERS DOWN IN THE C.T.A. ARRANGED JUST LIKE THEY ARE IN THE BAY! THINK YOU CAN HANDLE THAT?!"

"Sir yes sir!" Vilan said strapping the arm band around his right forearm. Vilan looked around at the bay and the recruits staring at him. He sized things up quickly. "First squad start taking the bunks apart." Their bunks could easily be taken apart without the use of tools which would make them easier to fit through the door and carry down the stairs. "Second squad take down the mattress now then come back here and start taking down the bunks first has gotten apart. Third and fourth start taking down the wall lockers and setting them up. No less than two per wall locker they are heavy. Squad leaders see that they get it done."

"Yes PG!" They shouted. Everyone snapped to work even Vilan as he helped a recruit lift a wall locker and carry it down the stairs. As he did so he thought about all that Decker had undone. When they ate they still weren't allowed to talk but the DIs only kicked them out if they had been there too long. One a recruit had finished eating they didn't have to march back but run back in pairs. Then they got an hour of free time every night they could use to write letters and shower at their leaser before they had to be in their bunks. Things were just becoming bearable and Decker had just made that all vanish with one move. It took 45 minutes of back breaking effort but they had all the bunks taken apart, moved down to the C.T.A. and put back together. All the wall lockers were on line and fourth platoon stood on the new toe to line waiting on Willy who watched them from the balcony.

"Sir bay ready for inspection," Vilan said.

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT SHIT FOR BRAINS!" Willy shouted. "THAT'S NOT THE FUCKING BAY GET THAT SHIT BACK UP TO THE BAY ON THE DOUBLE!"

"Sir yes sir!" Vilan said and then turned to face the platoon. "Same squads same jobs let's move." He looked at his watch and saw they should have been sleeping in their bunks 15 minutes ago. After an hour this time since they had to go up the stairs and everything was where it was and not an inch from it Vilan had everyone stand toe to line most breathing heavily from the hard labor.

"Private Jones did I not say to have all the bunks and wall lockers down in the C.T.A.?" Willy asked his voice calm.

"You did sir but then you sai-" Vilan began.

"WANT I SAID WAS TO GET THESE BUNKS AND WALL LOCKERS DOWN IN THE C.T.A.! SO GET TO IT PG!" Willy screamed.

"Sir yes sir!" Vilan shouted. He then turned and looked the platoon over and could see that third and fourth squad were more exhausted from lifting the heavy wall lockers then first and second squad. "Third start taking the bunks apart, fourth start taking them down. First and second start taking the wall lockers down."

"Yes PG," The platoon mumbled. Vilan didn't mind they were supposed to have been asleep an hour and a half ago. This is how it went for most of the night the platoon taking the bunks and wall lockers down to the C.T.A. and then back up to the bay. Each time taking longer as the recruits became more exhausted. Sometimes George and Espenhover would take over for Willy. Then at five minutes past midnight after they had just gotten everything back up to the bay Espenhover told them to go sleep without changing. They didn't care however as they crawled into their bunks. All of them fell asleep right away but only slept for 15 minutes as they were awoken by the crackling and glowing light of flames. In the kill zone stood Bunny a ring of fire already burning around him with Private Decker standing inside the ring eating something. The recruits slowly circled around the kill zone, as close as the flames would dictate, their arms, shoulders and backs already aching. Zimmerman could tell that Decker was eating M&Ms now and seemed quite pleased with himself, which pissed Zimmerman off, it pissed them all off.

"It's seems one of you did something very bad," Bunny whispered. "To make sure you keep a closer eye on him I want you to remember this lesson. Front leaning rest position move." Bunny worked them for hours, until even Vilan couldn't left himself off the floor anymore as Decker ate M&Ms and watch. After Bunny had them recover he ordered them to move the bunks and wall lockers down to the C.T.A. Vilan knew none of them where in any shape for heavy lifting then.

"Everyone start breaking down the bunks," He ordered. "Then four on every bunk half and lay the wall lockers on their side and carry them down with no less than six on each. Once they are down in the C.T.A. we will all move them into position. Let's get it done." This time the platoon said nothing as they slowly went to work. Two hours later the platoon had the wall lockers and bunks down and arranged and it was no surprise that Bunny told them to move them back up to the bay when they were done. Vilan was helping a recruit tip a wall locker over when Zimmerman suddenly shouted.

"Platoon attention!" Zimmerman shouted as loud as he could muster. The recruits that were down in the C.T.A. dropped what they were doing and stood at attention. Captain Ford had stepped into the C.T.A. "Morning sir." Zimmerman said as he tried to salute but when he started to bring his hand up his arm started to shake and he found himself unable to raise his arm any higher.

"Carry on privates," Ford said walking past them. The arrival of Captain Ford was not good. Vilan looked at his watch it was 0500 PT formation was at 0600 and they still had half their bunks and wall lockers in the C.T.A. Not to mention they hadn't but 15 minutes of sleep. They managed to get everything back up into the bay by 0553 and then Willy had them shave and change into PTs before heading down

to the C.T.A. Since their first day fourth platoon had never been late again until that day. For that Willy punished them but once they got into the push-up position no one, not even Vilan, could left themselves back up. After accountability they formed up to run. Vilan didn't know how they were going to make it through the day but he knew one thing he absolutely hated Decker now. They made it back from the run, barely, showered, change and ate breakfast. They then piled onto the bus that would take the company to the range where as soon as they sat down all of them fell asleep for the 45 minute bus ride.

Things didn't get much better for fourth platoon on the range as several privates fell asleep in the prone firing position, rifles pressed to their shoulders even as rounds were fired all around them. Scores for fourth platoon were awful that day. Then during lunch Private Stone ripped Decker's MRE from his hands and removed the dessert before handing it back to him. Once they got back to the bay that night Willy didn't give them an hour of personal time, told them to go right to sleep and not to worry about fire guard that night. The platoon never slept more soundly then they did that night.

## 6. An easy day

**\*\*Two weeks after the M&M incident as it was known to fourth platoon.\*\***

It was a very bleak day. The sky was gray, the wind was just about constant and the rain fell in large drops. Even as fourth platoon marched in it, the rain slowly soaking through their uniforms they were in high spirits. Everyone of fourth platoon had qualified yesterday, Vilan scoring Hawkeye like everyone knew he would. Zimmerman managed to hit 36 getting expert, even Decker had squeezed out 22 to just make marksmen after Vilan had gone over BMR skills with him every night(and may or may not have memorized the target orders and told Decker what target was going to pop up before it did). Today was Saturday, which was the day they were supposed to go to the weapon emersion range to lean about every other small arm the UNSCMC employed. Then the indirect fire range to learn about the heavy and anti-armor weapons. Tomorrow was Sunday the day they got off then Monday was their first combat exercise. However the weather had canceled the trip to the ranges, they would have to make it up after the combat exercise. So the company had spent the morning in their respective platoon classrooms going over battle drills and combat tactics. Now they broke for lunch, after it was back to the classroom for more tactics, all in all it looked like an easy day for fourth platoon for once. Vilan had retained his PG position and marched the platoon in prefect step as he started their favorite cadence.

"Here we go again!"

\_"Here we go again!"\_

"Same old shit again!"

\_"Same old shit again!"\_

"Marching down the avenue!"

\_"Marching down the avenue!"\_

"Four more weeks and we'll be through!"

\_"Four more weeks and we'll be through!"\_

"I won't have to look at you!"

\_"I won't have to look at you!"\_

"You won't have to look at me!"

\_"You won't have to look at me!"\_

"Am I right or wrong?!"

\_"You're right!"\_

"Are we weak or strong?!"

\_"We're strong!"\_

"Sound off!"

\_"One, two!"\_

"Sound off!"

\_"Three, four!"\_

"Break it on down now!"

\_"One, two, three, four! One two...three, four! AHHHHHHHHH  
ONE!"\_

"All you troopers!"

\_"Two!"\_

"Better do your best!"

\_"Three!"\_

"Before you find my boot!"

\_"Four!"\_

"So far up your ass! Hit it!"

\_"One!"\_

"Hit it!"

\_"Two!"\_

"Hit it!"

\_"Three!"\_

"Hit it!"

\_"Four!"\_

"Hit it!"

"\_One, two, three, four! I love the Marine Corps! We like it here! We love it here! We finally found a home!"\_

"A what!?"

"\_A home!"\_

\_ "A what!?"

\_"A home away from home!"\_

"Left...left...left, right...right...right...right, left," Vilan said keeping time again as they neared the mess hall's two doors that was its entrance. "Platoon halt." The group came to a sharp and smart looking stop. "Chow sling weapons." The privates placed their rifles over their heads so the strap ran across their chest and so the rifle lay flat across their backs. Vilan then started the ritual that they had perfected over the weeks. "Chow formation!"

"Chow formation!" The formation responded in unison as the first and fourth file took a step back.

"Chow formation!" Vilan called again.

"Chow formation!" The formation responded again the first and fourth file taking another step back so now there were large gaps between the recruits in the first and fourth files.

"Chow formation!" Vilan called one last time.

"Chow formation!" The platoon responded. "One shot!" The second and third rank took a half side step towards the outside of the formation. "One kill!" The two ranks took another step so the second was halfway inside the first and the third was half way inside of the fourth. "Kill we will!" The two inside ranks took one last step so now instead of four files there were only two lines, one for each of the mess hall's doors.

"Last two Reapers secure the doors!" Vilan ordered using the platoon's nickname. The last two recruits from the back of the two lines each ran to the doors. Vilan then looked over at DI Espenhover who simply nodded. "First ten Reapers into the mess hall!"

"Zero one Reaper!" The recruit in front of the line that held the first and second ranks shouted as he ran inside the mess hall as the recruit by the door held it open.

"Zero two Reaper!" The recruit at the head of the line for the third and fourth rank shouted just before he ran inside himself. This was repeated until everyone was inside the mess hall, received their food and seating at a table to eat it in under 10 minutes. Vilan, being PG, was the last one to eat no matter what, sat down at the first available spot next to Private Wilson. Vilan ducked his head closer to his tray and used his spoon to shove in his Chile-mac as fast as he could go. When Vilan was younger he never understood why his



father ate so fast but now he understood, old habits die hard. After he had finished eating he looked around the table to see who else was done. Stone was also looking around since he was also done. The two locked eyes and both nodded, signaling they were both ready to leave. Since they were not allowed to talk this was how they learned to communicate.

The two stood up simultaneously, picked up their trays and started to walk towards the tray return.

PG," Espenhover said beckoning Vilan over to the table where he sat with the other platoons' drill instructors. Vilan with Stone behind him walked over to where Espenhover sat.

"Sir?" Vilan said unable to salute due to the tray he held in his hands.

"Drill Instructor Willy requests you take the platoon on a run," Espenhover said. "Along Eagle run till you reach the obstacle course. Think you can handle that?"

"Yes sir," Vilan said turned to walk out to tell the platoon to stop eating so they wouldn't vomit.

"Oh PG," Espenhover called after Vilan, who whipped back around. "It's a combat run so full battle rattle." Vilan gulped that meant they were supposed to run the five miles to the course in full armor and kit carrying their rifles at port arms.

"Understood sir," Vilan said. "Who will be leading the formation?"

"Didn't you hear me private?" Espenhover said sitting up and raising his voice a little but not shouting yet. "You are."

"Yes sir," Vilan said turning again. Stone and him dropped off the trays and spread the word to stop eating and get out. They were a little upset they couldn't finish eating then when they were told about the five mile combat run they were happy to stop. As they rushed out in pairs and ran back to the barracks Vilan stayed in the mess hall hurrying them out. Once he was sure everyone else had left he and Stone jogged back to the barracks as well. Vilan was pleased to see everyone changing into their field uniforms and strapping on their armor. Their 'field' uniforms were the ones they had worn on the obstacle course and had become stained with red patches on the knees and elbows from the sand. They were told to wear these when every they would be "crawling through the mud" or on crappy days as not to ruin anymore uniforms.

"Squad leaders," Vilan said loud enough so all could hear. "I want everyone of your recruits inspected and ready to step off in...10 minutes." Vilan then went and hurried to change himself.

"Hey how long is this run?" Zimmerman asked as he pulled his chest/back plates over his head and strapped them on.

"It is to the obstacle course so five miles," Vilan said pulled up his stained pants and pulling his belt tight. "Approximately."

"Five miles in all this shit?" Zimmerman asked strapping on his left

gallant.

"Indeed," Vilan said button up his uniform jacket. "Make sure to have full canteens."

"Yes sir PG sir!" Zimmerman said saluting his unstrapped right gallant falling from his arm. "Shit." He said as he bent to pick it. Vilan shook his head as he started to strap on his own armor starting at his legs. After he had finished Vilan stood in the middle of the bay and watch as the squad leaders checked to make sure their squad members' armor was tight, their canteens were full and their boots were double knotted. After Vilan saw they were done.

"Squad leaders report," He ordered.

"PG first squad is ready for PT," Private Valentine said.

"Second squad ready to go PG," Private Smith reported.

"All members of third squad ready and welling," Private Thompson announced.

"PG," Private Hook said bring his hand up in a crisp picture perfect salute. "Fourth squad 14 assigned, 14 prepped and ready for duty." Vilan returned his salute.

"Aright form up down in the C.T.A.," He ordered. A little while later Vilan was marching them through the parking lot, in the pouring rain, towards the road they had ran their first morning there, a route fourth platoon had become very familiar with. As the formation turned onto the road Vilan addressed the formation.

"Start at a slow pace," Vilan said. "We have a long way to go and this armor will not make it any easier." The formation said nothing as they clutched their rifles four inches from their chest as the rain rolled off their helmets. "Double timmmmmmmeeee!"

"Double timmmmmmmeeee!" The formation shouted.

"March!" Vilan called the platoon started into a slow jog. Vilan didn't know if he should try a cadence or not but he hated running in silence. "I hear you calling!"

"\_I hear you calling!\_"

"Calling for meeeee!"

"\_Calling for meeeee!"\_

"King of battle!"

"\_King of battle!"\_

\_ "\_Field artillleeeerrrrrryyyyy!"

"\_Field artillleeeerrrrrryyyyy!"\_

"Your left your right now get on up!"

"\_Your left your right now get on up\_"

"Your left your right now get on down!"  
"\_Your left your right now get on down!"\_  
"Your left your right now stick and move!"  
"\_Your left your right now stick and move!"\_  
"Your left your right you've got the groove!"  
"\_Your left your right you've got the groove!"\_  
"I hear you calling!"  
"\_I hear you calling!\_"  
"Calling for meeeee!"  
"\_Calling for meeeee!"\_  
"Queen of battle!"  
"\_Queen of battle!"\_  
\_ "MC infinrrrrrryyyyy!"  
"MC infinrrrrrryyyyy!"\_  
"Your left your right now get on up!"  
"\_Your left your right now get on up\_!"  
"Your left your right now get on down!"  
"\_Your left your right now get on down!"\_  
"Your left your right now stick and move!"  
"\_Your left your right now stick and move!"\_  
"Your left your right you've got the groove!"  
"\_Your left your right you've got the groove!"\_  
"I hear you calling!"  
"\_I hear you calling!\_"  
"Calling for meeeee!"  
"\_Calling for meeeee!"\_  
\_ "\_Ace of battle!"  
"\_Ace of battle!"\_  
"Mechanized infinrrrrrryyyyy!"  
"\_Mechanized infinrrrrrryyyyy!"\_

"Your left your right now get on up!"

"\_Your left your right now get on up!"

"Your left your right now get on down!"

"\_Your left your right now get on down!"\_

"Your left your right now stick and move!"

"\_Your left your right now stick and move!"\_

"Your left your right you've got the groove!"

"\_Your left your right you've got the groove!"\_

Alright," Vilan said speaking towards the formation again. "We have a long road ahead of us. Focus on your breathing and it will be over soon." The cadence had caused the formation to subconsciously increase their speed to a true double time pace which was a fast jog/slow run. As always the first mile was the hardest but after completing the first half of the second mile every recruits' mind was numb. They could no longer feel anything but the rain on their rifles and could only hear the sound of boots hitting concrete. The rain and wind kept them from overheating but soaked their uniforms all the way through. Even where their armor clung to them was soaked with their sweat as the plates keep the rain out, but the heat in. The platoon ran remaining in prefect step and maintained their speed but the breathing of most had become ragged and Vilan could tell very soon some were going to fall out. He looked forward again and could see the red sand of the obstacle course and parked near it was the company's duce 'n' half truck. Resting his back against the truck's cab was a man wearing a marine uniform and a brown round of a drill instructor.

"Observe," Vilan said pointing at the truck. Since he was leading the formation he was allowed to sling his rifle. "We have almost reached our destination and the duce is nearby. We will ride back." Hearing this as well as seeing the truck caused most to get their second wind and the formation increased their speed again. Just before they reached the sand Vilan called a command.

"Quick time march," Vilan ordered sounding a little winded but not much for having just ran five miles in full kit. The formation slowed from a run to a march still in step and most panting heavily. Vilan knew they didn't really have the wind for a cadence but he also knew that if he didn't the drill instructor might punish them. So he choose the easiest cadence he knew and was quite applicable for the current situation. "In the early morning rain!"

\_"In the early morning rain!"\_

"In the early morning rain!"

\_"In the early morning rain!"\_

"In the early morning rrrrrraaaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAIIIIIIINNNNNN!"

\_"In the early morning rrrrrraaaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAIIIIIIINNNNNN!"\_

"Four by four we march again!"

\_"Four by four we march again!"\_

"In the early morning rain!"

\_"In the early morning rain!"\_

"In the early morning rain!"

\_"In the early morning rain!"\_

"In the early morning rrrrrraaaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAIIIIIIINNNNNN!"

\_"In the early morning rrrrrraaaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAIIIIIIINNNNNN!"\_

"We train again today!"

\_"We train again today!"\_

"Platoon halt," Vilan ordered the platoon coming to a rough stop centered on the DI who happened to be DI George. "Right face." The platoon was now facing George and the truck. "Order arms." The recruits lowered their rifles so they were next to their right foot. Vilan executed an about face and saluted. "Sir platoon has completed the combat run as requested."

"Very good PG," George said spitting brown goo on the ground. "Now before you can go back to your nice dry and warm barracks everyone has to run the course three times."

"Yes sir," Vilan said turning around to face the platoon as DI George spat more brown goo on the ground. "Open ranks march." The platoon spread out as they were used to that command right before they were dropped. "Stack arms." On this command the formation grouped their rifles up in groups of three, with their rifle butts on the ground so they stood on their own. Once that was complete Vilan had them fall out and line up at the start of the course. George blew a whistle and the recruits ran the course in the rain like they did before. It hadn't changed, first: the high crawl, followed by the monkey bars, then the rope climb, staggered tires, rope crawl, low crawl through even deeper mud, jump in and out of the trench, bear crawl before crawling through the concrete tubes thigh deep in water before they got to the wall. Vilan helped the entire platoon over this time before he pulled himself up and jumped down himself.

This time it was much harder because of their armor and the fact they had just ran five miles and didn't get a break before they started to run the course. The first time was bad, the second sucked and the third was just plain hell. All the recruits could barely do each obstacle as it took them nearly twice as long to complete each one. Even Vilan was struggling have to literally carry a few recruits through a few obstacles. When they got to the wall for the last time he was pretty much picking recruits up and lifted them so they could stand on top and drop down. The last recruit he picked up and placed on top of the wall was Zimmerman. When he was on top Vilan jumped up and grabbed the top of the wall but didn't have the strength to pull himself up. He shut his eyes and used every last bit of his strength he pulled himself up and was able to get his head over the top of the

wall when his arms gave out and he dropped back down hanging off the ground.

He started to pull himself up again and knew he wouldn't be able to make it when a hand reached behind his back and grabbed his belt. It belong to Zimmerman who had remained sitting on the top of the wall just in case Vilan had been unable to make it over. With Zimmerman's help Vilan made it to the top of the wall and sat down heavily on top of it. Both recruits were panting heavily as they looked at each other, Zimmerman smiled his toothy grin before he dropped down with Vilan right behind him. The two ran side by side to the finish line and after crossing it the two leaned forward resting their hands on their knees.

"You're...starting to...slow...down," Zimmerman wheezed. "I even had to...had to...pick your ass up...over the wall."

"Whom was it that put you on top of the wall?" Vilan demanded straightening up recovering much quicker than Zimmerman.

"Whatever man...I still fucking...win," Zimmerman said with a wave of his hand.

"What did you win?" Vilan asked confused as he walked towards where the rest of the platoon stood trying to catch their breath.

"Never mind...asshole," Zimmerman panted jogging to catch up with Vilan. When Vilan reached to the group George was still leaning against the truck's cab with his eyes half closed, occasionally spitting black goo on the ground, as rain dripped off his brimmed hat. He was known as the 'mild' drill instructor but they all knew he could go from zero to 60 in half a second.

"Sir the platoon has completed the course," Vilan said saluting. "Three times." George looked at Vilan then at the mud and sand that covered his armor and uniform, then passed Vilan to the rest of the platoon that stood around in a gaggle most looking as though they were about to pass out.

"Well alright then," George said standing up and uncrossing his arms. "Form 'em up PG."

"Yes sir," Vilan said dropping his salute and turning around. "Fall in!" The recruits snapped out of their funk and hurried to make a formation centered on Vilan. After they were formed up Vilan turned back around and saluted again. George removed a wad of black dip from his lower lip and tossed it on the ground.

"My PTSD medicine," George explained since DIs weren't allowed to use tobacco in front of recruits. "Alright I got good news, bad news and worse news. The good news is we're heading home, the bad news is we're marching back." Ever recruits' heart dropped after hearing that, outwardly they wore stone faces knowing better than to show emotion. George then walked around to the back of the truck and dropped the tail gate. "The worse news is it's a ruck march." With that George threw up the flap that covered the back of the truck to reveal their rucksacks the DIs had taken from the bay and packed with 70bls of sand. "Let's go PG I want to step off in 15 minutes."

"Yes sir," Vilan said stepping up to the back of the truck. "Squad

leaders with me." They had completed two of their three mandatory ruck marches already and he knew that the key was the placement of the rucksack. If the rucksack was set right a trooper could walk for miles without a problem. It was also damn near impossible to put the rucksack on yourself and set it right. So Vilan and the rest of the squad leaders found out who each pack belonged to and then helped the recruit get it on. After Vilan helped the squad leaders get their packs on and set he got his own on and pulled the straps tight so it sat high on his shoulders. He then split the platoon in half and had them form two equal lines facing the road. They stood there waiting as the rain tried to soak through the water proofed packs.

"PG," George said pulling a box from the back of the truck. Vilan jogged over to him his 70lb pack raising up on his shoulders before slamming back down with each step he took.

"Sir," Vilan said before he could salute George pressed the box into his hands. He looked inside of it and saw it was full of magazines loaded with stun rounds.

"One for each of you," George explained. "In case you run into any...opposition." Vilan nodded as he hurried to distribute the ammo. After each recruit locked and loaded their 32 stun rounds Vilan returned the empty box to Gorge who tossed into the back of the truck. George then gave the command and Vilan moved them out. One column marching on the left side of the road the other on the right. Each recruit held their rifle at the low ready scanning the trees on either side of the road ensuring they kept three meters between themselves and the recruit in front and behind them. Vilan marched in-between the two columns keeping order and making sure they kept their spacing and remained alert. George jumped back into the cab of the truck and seated himself behind the wheel. Already seating in the passenger seat was DI Espenhover who had remained in the truck the entire time.

"What smells like wet dog?" Espenhover asked as George closed his door.

"Very funny asshole," George remarked as he started the engine. "All you tankers this funny?"

"More or less," Espenhover said taking George's can of 'PTSD medicine' from the dash and helping himself to a pinch.

"And you steal my fucking dip," George said as he shifted into first gear and slowly drove behind the marching troops with his hazards on.

"Yeah I own you one alright," Espenhover said picking up the truck's radio handset. "Hopper this is War Eagle we are on the move over."

"Roger that War Eagle," The voice on the other end said. "Advise when they are in the kill zone Hopper out." Espenhover placed the handset back on its hook and spat into a empty bottle.

Again it was the first mile that was the hardest as fourth platoon marched as the sun started to go down. They were still being pelted by the rain but that along with the wind and exhaustion made their bodies go numb quickly. Every recruit had their head pointing down as

they let their minds go numb as well. All any could think about was putting one foot in front of the other and keep hold of their now slippery rifles. Even Vilan had given up with trying to keep them alert and vigilant as he himself stared at the ground.

"Pssshhh," A hushed voice said intruding on Vilan's thoughts. He looked up and over to the right column and saw that it was Zimmerman who had made the noise. Vilan remained moving forward but inched closer to Zimmerman but not to close as they weren't allowed to talk during marches.

"What is it my friend?" Vilan asked out of the side of his mouth something that was very tricky for him to do but he was getting better at it.

"How far have we gone?" Zimmerman asked in a loud whisper. Vilan looked up and stared at the road and trees ahead as he considered his answer.

"We should be approaching three miles when we reach that fallen tree there," Vilan said risking to point at a tree that was far off in the distance.

"How do you know that?" Zimmerman demanded.

"I pace it out as we ran," Vilan explained.

"You kept a pace count as we ran in full battle rattle?" Zimmerman asked as Vilan simply nodded. "You're truly amazing." Vilan took the complement in stride and moved back to the middle of the road. Vilan looked up at the sky and let the rain hit his face and wondered how it could rain so hard for so long. He then pulled his canteen from his belt, unscrewed the cap and finished it off in one long gulp. He placed it back on his belt and looked back at the fallen tree to see it had gotten closer. Soon the front of the formation would reach it. Back in the dry warm truck cab Espenhover saw this and picked up the radio's handset again.

"Hopper this is War Eagle," He said speaking into the mouth piece. "We are nearing the kill zone you should have visual contact shortly over."

"Roger that War Eagle Hopper out," The voice on the other end said.

Setting on a rotten log, surrounded by trees, was a very happy man. He was deep in the wooded area but he could still just see the road. This man wore the uniform of a UNSC marine, had the rank of a gunnery sergeant and the mask of a bunny over his face. He whistled to himself as he loaded stun rounds into a magazine for his DMR. After he pushed the last round into the magazine, still whistling, loaded the magazine into the DMR's receiver and cycled the bolt. He continued to whistle as he took up a kneeling position resting the rifle on the log and peered through the scope. He only stopped whistle as the first recruits of fourth platoon came into view. He knelt motionless as he waited for his target and it wasn't long before he find him. Private Stone, next to Vilan he was the tallest at 6' 3'' and 225lbs of well toned muscle(Stone was the perfect name for him) the perfect candidate for a simulated casualty. Bunny shifted his aim so the scope's reticle was on Stone's neck. He fired



the shot echoing between the trees, the noise scaring away a few birds from their dry perches.

The round hit Stone in the neck, the third worse place to get hit by a stun round(the second was the face and first the groin) however it was the worse 'legal' place to be hit. Stone's muscles locked up as he fell to the ground unable to move or even speak. The rest of the recruits immediately dropped to the ground rifles up scanning the tree line.

"Where is he!?" Vilan shouted. "Did anyone see the shooter!?"

"No!" A private shouted back as he grabbed Stone's leg and pulled him out of the middle of the road.

"What side was he hit on!?" Vilan demanded from his prone position his pack pressing heavily on his back.

"Left side!" The private shouted back.

"The shooter is on the left side!" Vilan shouted. "Left column scan your areas and stay down! Right column maintain 360 degree security! What are his wounds!?" The private was about to open his mouth to shout he was hit in the neck when Espenhover spoke over the radio his voice coming through their helmet speakers.

"He has a wound in his chest cavity near the left side," Espenhover said coming up with the simulated wounds for the simulated casualty. "Pneumothorax tension symptoms present themselves."

"He's got a sucking chest wound!" The private shouted referring to a chest wound that caused air to build up in his chest cavity making it harder and harder to breathe. The way to treat it was a air tight dressing over both the entrance and exit wounds, then treat with a needle chest decompression to remove the built up air.

"Treat his wounds!" Vilan shouted as he removed his pack. "I need three to drop their packs and come with me." Vilan said turning to the recruits behind him. Zimmerman was the first to remove his pack and high crawled over to Vilan. Privates Thompson and Wilson crawled up next to him as well. "We need to flush the shooter out," Vilan explained. "Follow me." Vilan started to crawl towards the tree line with Zimmerman right behind him and Thompson and Wilson behind them. Meanwhile the private who had pulled Stone to 'safety' started to 'treat' his 'wounds'. He had removed Stone's chest and back armor and had stuck a dressing on his chest and back. He then rapped both of the dressings with a bandage roll. He didn't stick a needle in his chest one he didn't have any in his med kit(he would in a combat one) and Stone wasn't really wounded.

"Albright where is the bastard?" Zimmerman whispered. Vilan peered into the woods and caught the sight of something white against the green and brown of the trees near a rotted log.

"There," Vilan said pointing at the white shape. "You two." Vilan pointed at Thompson and Wilson. "Move at him from this side. We are going to move around and get behind him."

"Roger," Thompson said high crawling as fast and quietly as he could go with Wilson right behind him. Vilan and Zimmerman branched out and

circled behind him both taking cover behind trees. Vilan keyed his radio. "Thompson, Wilson we are going to try and flush him from cover when he moves you get him. If you miss we will support you."

"Roger," Wilson's voice said coming over the built in coms.

"Left column I want you to fire into the tree line," Vilan said. "Aim for a rotten fallen tree. Fire now."

Bunny was waiting for a private to screw up and poke his head up. He sat resting his rifle on the log quietly whistling to himself, when all hell broke loose. Stun rounds flew at him impacting the log, the ground and leaves all around him. He ducked back behind the log and pulled a flashbang from his belt. He threw it towards the road and when it went off the fire slacked and then stopped. Free to move Bunny turned on his heel and ran deeper into the woods. He caught movement out of the corner of his left eye and snapped his head in the direction. Two privates had popped up and leveled their rifles at him as he fled. They fired but their rounds missed and they had made the mistake of stand up. Bunny fired his DMR one handed at the two recruits causing them to duck and drop back to the ground as his free hand pulled another flashbang from his belt. He chucked it at the two privates blinding them and keeping them in cover.

'Clever sons of bitches' Bunny thought and he turned his attention back to running deeper into the woods. When he did he saw something gray laying in the dirt, he was still trying to figure out what it was when there was a pair of flashes from the ground. He felt the two stun rounds hit him square in the chest. The thought that went through his head as he fell to the ground due to his muscles locking up was: clever girl. Vilan slowly rose from the ground a wisp of smoke trailing from the barrel of his rifle the ammo counter now reading 30 instead of 32.

"Holy shit you just smoked Bunny," Zimmerman said standing up at well.

"Smoke?" Vilan asked with the rifle still pressed into his shoulder.

"Never mind," Zimmerman said. "Call it in."

"Right," Vilan said keying his helmet mike again. "Shooter is down I say again shooter is down." Back in the cab of the truck DI George and Espenhover exchanged glances as they heard Vilan's voice over the radio. "Moving to search shooter." Espenhover fumbled with the radio handset.

"Negative. Negative," Espenhover said into the handset. "Med evac. is unable to land in this area you must take the casualty to the barracks for extraction. The bird will be touching down in 30 minutes you have to be there before then." Hearing this Vilan and Zimmerman had no choice but to leave Bunny where he lay, but not before Zimmerman fired a double tap into his back.

"Man I was hoping we were going to find out who that asshole is," Zimmerman said as they jogged back to the road joining the rest of the platoon.

"Zimmerman I saw a stretcher in the back of the truck," Vilan said as he knelt down next to Stone. "Go retrieve it quickly." Zimmerman ran off to go get it. "How is he?"

"He's 'stabilized'," The private said.

"Good. On your feet!" Vilan shouted. The platoon slowly got to their feet their heavy packs making it difficult. Zimmerman returned with the stretcher and placed it on the road near Stone, who was still unable to move from the chemicals the stun rounds had pumped into his system. Vilan and Zimmerman left him and placed him on the stretcher. "I need four carriers." Four privates stepped forward to carry Stone.

"Who will take his pack?" Zimmerman asked.

"I will," Vilan said as he looked at his watch. "We have 26 minutes to make it two miles we will have to pick up the pace. Move out!" The four privates lifted Stone up and started to jog down the middle of the road with the two columns jogging along side them. Vilan now carrying 140lbs of weight, yet he would stop the stretcher carriers and switch them out when he saw when they were becoming exhausted. They were all tired and most had slowed from a jog to a power walking pace. Vilan looked around every recruit looked like they were about to kill over any second including himself. In the distance the lights of the parking lot were seen by Vilan and just a bit further on was the hill that their barracks sat on. He looked at his watch and after wiping some rain drops from the face he saw they only had a few minutes left.

"Alright!" Vilan shouted struggling to draw a good breath now. "We are almost there! Give me everything you have got! Do not hold back! TAKE THE HIGH GROUND!" Vilan shouted the company motto just before he ran as fast as he could. The others saw this and the sight of the barracks and they to ran as fast as their physical state and packs allowed them to. They were going strong till they reach the hill and most fell on all fours as they kept going. Decker fell as he climbed the hill but instead of getting up he just lay there. Vilan tried of putting up with the bastard picked him up and dragged him up to the C.T.A. He dropped Decker off and sat down himself the two rucksacks pulling him down hard. He looked around and saw that they weren't alone in the C.T.A. First platoon was dry and comfortable in their PTs and waiting in line for the pay phones to get a five minute call home. He then looked at his platoon and saw that everyone of them was on the ground either on their ass, back or stomach several had passed out.

"NOT FUCKING GOOD ENOUGH ASSHOLES!" Willy's voice screamed echoing around the C.T.A. causing both his platoon and first platoon to look up at the balcony. "YOU MISSED THE BIRD BY 11 SECONDS. IT LEFT WITHOUT STONE WHO DIED BECAUSE YOU FAILED HIM! FRONT LEANING REST POSITION MOVE!" Vilan stared up at Willy and couldn't believe he expect them to do push-ups after what they had just been through. Zimmerman looked up at Willy and thought 'Damn I thought for sure he was Bunny.' Fourth platoon rolled over onto their stomachs but none of them had the strength to hold themselves up. Willy let them struggle for a few minutes before he told them to recover. They were handed MREs for dinner and then told to empty their packs before heading to the bay. To the recruits' dismay the DIs hadn't filled their packs with sandbags but loose sand they had to dump and scoop

out.

That complete they slowly climbed the stairs to the bay to find that it had been trashed. All the wall lockers had been pushed over and all the bunks were taken apart. It took them an hour and 45 minutes to get everything back to normal. After that Willy told them they were on personal time and could shower and read their letters he handed out. As the recruits limped to the showers to include Vilan, Zimmerman opened his large tan envelope, the kind used for documents. This is what he had been waiting for as he dumped its contents on his bunk. There was a short letter inside which he quickly read.

\_Dear Private Zimmerman, \_

\_ First off I want you to know how common the last name Jones is in the UNSCMC second I could get into a lot of trouble giving you this information while you are in basic. Anyway I found a Jones, Allen D. that had quote 'lived on a planet that had not been before recognized by the UNSC and a son by the name of Vilan Jones'. All I can say is who is this guy? There are some missions in his combat record that still haven't been declassified. I have enclosed his file, one mission AAR and a few photos that I had found.\_

\_ Good luck man, \_

\_ Lance Corporal Reed.\_

Zimmerman tossed the letter aside and found the personal file and skimmed it. \_Last name: Jones First name: Allen Middle initial: D. Date of birth\_: . Zimmerman skipped down to the bottom. \_Dependents: Two, Aima Jaren Jones: wife; Vilan Kalmare Jones: son.\_ Zimmerman set the file back down on his bunk.

"This is him all right," Zimmerman said to himself pleased he had found Jones's father. He then picked up the mission after action report and read it as well, it was a short read since most of it was blacked out.

\_Location: Sole Seven, Date:\_ (a black line here hide the date).

\_Combat outpost B26 came under Covenant assault and in danger of being over ran. Mixed units were dispatch from the forward operation base. In one dropship was PFC Jones, \_ (here a long black line covered up anymore names). \_They touched down and assaulted a barracks and found Lieutenant \_ (a black line) \_wounded by a HVT that had retreated to a Covenant outpost. Under the command of Lieutenant \_ (black line) \_the five marines and two sniper teams launch a raid on the outpost.\_ (Here black lines blocked out everything else expect for the very bottom of the report). \_The outpost was completely neutralized without any friendly casualties and resulted in the capture of the HVT a Field Marshal \_ (yet another black line). \_PFC Jones recommended for a sliver star by Lieutenant \_ (black line). \_PFC Jones received the silver star on \_ (the last black line blocked out the date). Zimmerman set the report down he couldn't believe that five marines had taken down a Covenant outpost and Jones's father had gotten a sliver star. Zimmerman then started with the photos.

The first one he saw showed two marines without shirts grilling meat over a open fire in a fox hole. One was a Caucasian with tanned skin

from spending a long period of time in sunlight and brown hair. The other was of Hispanic appearance with darker skin and jet black hair. The two grinned up at the camera as the Caucasian used a knife to roast the meat as the Hispanic held a can of beer up. Zimmerman flipped to the next picture. This one was of the same two marines from the last picture but fully dressed. On the ground in front of them was a dead Hunter and both marines had a foot up on his pack as they held their rifles in the air. A clearly staged and cheesy photo but that didn't stop the two from grinning from ear to ear. Zimmerman leaned in closer to read their name tapes. The Hispanic was: Mendez and the Caucasian was: Jones.

Zimmerman flipped through more photos to see the pair always together and always smiling. Until Zimmerman got to a photo that only showed Jones as he received a promotion to corporal he wasn't smiling them. Every other photo of Jones he was never smiling again until he got to a photo of him standing next to a Elite. The Elite wore the golden armor of a field marshal and both wore grins as they sat at a table holding glasses of amber colored liquid. The last photo was the most interesting: It showed 10 kneeling Elites, wearing blue armor and stone faces, in a line and in the middle of the line stood Jones now at the rank of staff sergeant. To Zimmerman it looked like a typical squad photo and then Zimmerman gasped. He had heard rumors that during the war with the Brutes a few Elite squads had human leaders as the UNSC experimented with mixed units. Everything became so clear for Zimmerman then: Jones's father must have worked with the Elites and ended up falling in love with one or something like that.

"What is that my friend," Vilan asked a towel around his waist.

"Nothing," Zimmerman said hurrying to stuff everything back into the file. "Nothing." Vilan eyed him but didn't press. Zimmerman locked the file in his wall locker and went to take his own shower. Soon the two were in their bunks with the rest of the platoon. It was midnight and the two privates on fire guard were Stone and Hook. Both were seating at the fire guard desk when footsteps alerted them. They looked up and saw Decker out of his bunk and walking towards them.

"Get back in your fucking bunk," Stone ordered standing and squaring up with his.

"Hey man," Decker said putting his hands up. "I just got to take care of some 'private business'." He explained hooking a thumb towards the bathroom.

"You have one fucking minute," Stone growled.

"I was thinking more like ten," Decker said. Stone opened his mouth to say something but Decker cut him off. "Alright I'm going to jack it ok. Just give me 10 minutes." Decker then pulled out a 20 and laid it on the desk.

"You have 10 fucking minutes," Stone growled picking up the money and stuffing it in his pocket. "Not a minute more." Decker nodded and walked off to the bathroom. After exactly 10 minutes Stone walked into the bathroom and to the only stall that was closed.

"Times up," Stone said pounding on the door. When he did the door

opened and Stone's jaw dropped along with the flash light he had in his hand. It fell to the ground and chattered across the smooth floor. Vilan was in a dreamless sleep and enjoying every second of it when he felt a hand on his shoulder shake him.

"PG," Private Stone whispered. Vilan opened his eyes and saw the look on Stone's face and was fully alert then.

"What is it Stone?" Vilan said alert now.

"Its Decker," Stone said.

"What about him," Zimmerman asked awake but still groggy.

"He's gone," Stone said. The two sat up quickly then Zimmerman hitting his head on the bottom of Vilan's bunk.

"What'd mean he's gone?" Zimmerman demanded rubbing his head.

"He is gone," Stone said. "As in left the barracks after lights outs in other words: AWOL."

## 7. Saving Private Decker

Private Zimmerman shoved his foot into his boot, tucked the excess pants around his ankle into it and pulled the laces tight. After he had double knotted his boot's laces he stood up now fully dressed and walked over to where Vilan stood as he watched Private Stone. Stone was in front of one of the weapon racks that their rifles were locked into every night with the key pad covered pulled off exposing the wires and circuit cards of the device.

"This is so stupid. This is so stupid," Private Hook kept saying like a mantra. Zimmerman turned to him.

"What is?" He asked in a harsh whisper as not to wake everyone else up. Hook gave him a look that said: really you don't know.

"One going after the asshole yourselves instead of telling a DI," Hook explained. "Two breaking into the weapon racks after lights out is also right up there. Can you even do it?"

"Yes," Stone said sharply putting all his concentration into what he was doing. A moment later there was a metallic click as the lock slid back and Stone opened the case. Vilan and Zimmerman reached in and grabbed a weapon each. Not their rifles, as those would easily be messed by the DIs but a pistol instead. The pistols where for the DIs during combat excises, not that Willy hadn't shot everyone at least once with it for no particular reason. They each grabbed a magazine of stun rounds and silencers for the pistols and stated to screw the suppressers to the end of the pistols.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" Hook asked Stone as he shut the weapon rack, relocked it, and put the cover back on the key pad.

"Let's just say I wasn't always on the straight and narrow before my enlistment," Stone said standing up.

"You can't enlist if you're a convicted felon," Hook said more confused than angry.

"One I was never caught so I couldn't have been convicted," Stone explained. "And two what the UNSC doesn't know about my past won't hurt them."

"You lied when you in enlisted?" Hook asked disbelieving.

"Everybody lies when they enlist," Stone said with the wave of his hand. "You think they would have this many recruits if they didn't lie about one thing or another. You know how medically perfect you have to be to enlist? There is no way there is that many people out there that are like that and are willing to enlist."

"Well I didn't lie," Hook said puffing out his chest a little.

"Of course you didn't," Stone said and was about to say more when the sound of a magazine being slid into a pistol grip and snap of the slid moving forward echoed through the bay. Here a couple of the sleeping members of fourth platoon rolled in their beds and a few mumbled something but none woke up. It was Vilan who had loaded his pistol who was thinking how he himself had lied about his age to enlist. Zimmerman loaded his pistol and tucked it into his belt behind his back pulling his uniform jacket over it to conceal it. Vilan watched him and did the same thing. Zimmerman grabbed a roll of duct tape just before the two started to walk down one of the short hallways that lead to either the bathroom or showers Stone and Hook followed them.

"Let us go over it again," Vilan said as they walked. "If Willy comes in and wants a head count?"

"I tell him that you, Zimmerman and Decker went to take the trash out," Stone said. "You are punishing Decker by making him wake up in the middle of the night and take it out and you and Zimmerman are there to make sure he gets it done."

"Good," Vilan remarked. "If he comes back again and we have not returned still?"

"You're making him do a police call around the barracks," Stone said as they reached the door at the end of the hall that lead to the DI's hallways and their offices.

"Indeed," Vilan said. "If we are discovered remember you were unaware of our actions. The stories you have told to Willy are the stories we have told to you. I am the one that opened the weapon rack. Zimmerman I would prefer to do this alone so you do not get in to trouble."

"Fuck that," Zimmerman said. "I'm not just going to let my bunkmate go wondering around the base at night looking for the biggest fuck up that ever lived, without me. Beside it could be easier to talk our way out of a situation with a DI if there are two of us, you know proper battle buddy team and all." Vilan nodded the respect for his bunkmate increased more and more.

"Please I beg you not to go through with this," Hook pleaded. "Just tell the DI on duty and let it be his problem."

"Except that DI is Willy," Vilan explained. The company had reached the point where only one DI remained for the entire company as they slept. "Who do you think he will blame? Can you even image the punishment?" Hook dropped his gaze to the floor and knew Vilan was right, Willy probably make 'em carry the entire barracks building down to the obstacle course the crazy bastard. Vilan slowly opened the door and stuck his head out into the forbidden hallway and listened. Hearing nothing he opened it just enough to fit through as he stepped onto the waxed floor. Zimmerman was right behind him letting Stone catch the door so it wouldn't slam shut.

"Good luck," Stone said as he gently shut the door sealing the two privates in hostile territory. They started to move very slowly and very quietly down the hallway towards the back stairs that would taken them down and behind the barracks. Vilan was sure this was the way Decker took since Stone and Hook hadn't seen him leave through the bay door and there were no windows large enough to fit through. The reason that the two recruits didn't use the bay door was because of the two CQ runners setting at the CQ desk down in the C.T.A. They were fellow recruits but there were from first platoon and those goody, goody, phone call getting bastards would rat them out right away. And if they didn't they would crack if the DIs put the screws to them if Vilan and Zimmerman were caught.

As they moved down the hallway the sounds of gunfire and explosion could be heard letting the two know that Willy was playing his video game again. They reached the door to his office that they would have no choice but to pass it to reach the stairs. Vilan peeked around the corner and into the office. Willy had his back to him as he stared at a TV with displayed fast moving images of some virtual world, he had a controller in his hands and something sticking in his ear.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Willy demanded suddenly. Vilan shot his head back around the corner his heart thumping in his chest for he knew they were caught. He sat there waiting to the hear sound of boots walking towards them but he never did. Then Willy spoke again. "No you've got to do a 'nade jump from the light to reach the skull...What'd you mean you don't know how to do a 'nade jump? Fucking noob." It was clear to Zimmerman that he was playing with someone and speaking with them with a headset.

"It's ok," Zimmerman said sure Vilan didn't know what was happening. "He's talking to someone else with a headset, kind of like a radio. Vilan nodded and stuck his head back into the office. Willy hadn't moved still staring at the screen with his back to them.

"You've got to throw the grenade at your feet and jump right when it explodes," Willy explained a 'nade jump to his unseen friend. "No it won't kill you. You've just got to wait for your shields to recharge before you can do it again." Here there was a pause making Vilan think his friend was talking. "It's called blind it takes away your HUD." Another pause. "I don't fucking know it just does." Having heard enough Vilan quickly moved past the open door and pressed his back against the wall on the other side. He peeked his head in again to see Willy unchanged position and beckoned for Zimmerman to move across. He did taking some wall next to Vilan as the two looked at each other as they started to move towards the stairs again. They reach the stairs and started to slowly go down them. When they reached the bottom they had two choices a second hallway that would



lead them to second and first platoons' bays or a door right next to them that lead them outside. Vilan opened the door and stuck his head out, he looked left and right and after seeing nothing he stepped out into the night air. Zimmerman was still right behind him and let the door quietly shut behind them. Vilan looked down and could see fresh footprints in the soft muddy grass that the rain from that day had formed and knew Decker had been this way.

Vilan pointed at the footprints and Zimmerman saw them and nodded. The two started to walk along either side of them Vilan looking at the ground and Zimmerman everywhere else keeping his eyes piled for any DIs. The trail took them to the base of a steep hill and the two looked up. Upon the top sat more barracks but these were encircled with a fence and the recruits had been told that they should never, ever be near these barracks. Vilan and Zimmerman exchanged glances before as they used their eyes to follow the footprints up the hill losing them half way up in the dark. Sighing heavily the two started to climb up the hill having no choice but to follow the trail. Vilan was in the lead and the sound of boots on concrete reached his ears. He immediately stopped bring a closed fist up and then opened it up and pressed his palm towards the ground, the sign for 'stop and drop'. The two recruits dropped to their stomachs and placed their faces in the grass wishing it was higher as to better hide them. The footsteps got loud and soon they could hear voices.

"Then he said: 'but sir I didn't get to eat anything'," The voice was saying.

"He fucking didn't?" A second voice asked.

"The fuck he didn't," The first voice said only confusing Vilan more about that word. "I then said: 'that's too fucking bad drink and get out'." The two laughed and their voices started to fade as they had walked past the two privates lying in the grass and were moving away. Vilan slowly moved into a crouch, Zimmerman following his lead, and looked around. Not seeing anything he started to move again and soon they reached the top. The grass had ended and there was sidewalk stretched out in front of them bathed in orange light from the outside lights. On the other side was more grass, then the fence and finally the barracks beyond. Vilan thought he would have lost the trail at the sidewalk but the mud that had collected to Decker's shoes had been pressed into the sidewalk in the shape of his foot. It moved from the hill, crossed the sidewalk, back into the grass, and he could see patches of mud on the fence meaning he had climbed it. He clearly wasn't trying to be stealthy or he just wasn't good at it. Vilan sat on the sidewalk with his legs in the air his feet over the grass and used a stick to scrap the mud from the bottom of his boots, so he wouldn't leave foot prints. He handed the stick to Zimmerman who did the same thing. The two moved quickly across the sidewalk but not fast enough to make noise and reached the grass beyond. Zimmerman jumped up and grabbed the top of the fence and pulled himself over dropping into a crouch on the other side. Vilan was tall enough simply grabbed the top and pulled himself over.

After he had landed on the other side he looked along the ground until he had found Decker's trail again and followed it. It lead them to the back door of a barracks, the one that lead to the stairs. Zimmerman pulled on the handle but found it locked. He looked down and saw muddy footprints right in front of the door but he couldn't find any more in the grass meaning the bastard had be able to use the

door. He then saw a piece of paper on the ground and bent to pick it up. It had been folded over many times making it much thicker than it was, and Zimmerman knew then that someone had used it to jam the door to keep it from shutting all the way and when Decker had moved through it he knocked the paper loose.

"Shit," Zimmerman said under his breath. "We're going to have to try and go around to the front. Unless you just want to scrub this 'mission'?" Vilan thought it over for a second before answering.

"We will go around to their C.T.A. and if their CQ runners are there we will return to our barracks and inform Willy of his absence." Zimmerman nodded and followed Vilan as the two crept around the building.

"Why would he come here?" Zimmerman asked himself quietly.

"What was that my friend?" Vilan asked.

"I was just think why would he come here?" Zimmerman said a little louder. "I mean why risk coming here if you're going AWOL and risk getting caught?" Vilan just shrugged as he reached the end of the building and the start of the C.T.A. Vilan stuck his head around the corner and saw that they didn't have CQ runners posted and for that he was glad. He turned to face Zimmerman.

"They do not have runners," Vilan explained. "But the C.T.A. is very bright and we will easily be seen if anyone is around. Do we go back or after him?"

"You're the PG you decide and I'll follow your orders," Zimmerman said truly glad he could say that. Vilan didn't hesitate with his answer.

"We go after him," He said as Zimmerman nodded in agreement. "First platoon's bay door is the closest from our position. We should go in that way and explain the situation to their fireguard and hopefully they will understand."

"Alright," Zimmerman said. "I'm sure they got a fuck up in their platoon as well at least in their company." Vilan nodded in agreement as he stepped around and up to the C.T.A. Just before he step onto the concert pad he wiped the bottoms of his boots clean again. The two jogged over to the door and pressed their backs to the wall on either side of the double doors. Zimmerman pulled his pistol from behind his back and held it at his waist pointing it at the ground. He partially pulled the slide back to ensure there was a chambered round before he flipped the safety off. Vilan eyed him.

"In case they don't understand," Zimmerman explained. "I say we drop 'em before they can raise the alarm." Vilan understood again as he drew his own pistol, checked it and flipped the safety off as well. Vilan nodded when he was ready and Zimmerman started to count down using his hand. When he reached one he gripped the door handle and pulled it open and Vilan twisted inside bring the pistol up as he did so. He scanned the dark bay for the fireguard desk and found it in a similar position as their own and turned towards it bring the pistol around.

"Do not move. Do not speak," He said in a harsh whisper as not to

wake the sleeping recruits. The two marine recruits that were behind the desk had jump up and stood 'at easy' when the door had opened thinking it was a drill instructor. But once they saw that he didn't have the brown round of a DI they were about to speak maybe even yell, until he spoke and they saw the pistol. Zimmerman was inside the bay then, leveling his own pistol at the two recruits as well, he stuck his foot out behind him catching the door before it slammed shut. Using his foot and keeping his eyes on the two recruits he eased the door shut the bay becoming completely dark again, the two recruits on fireguard nothing more than shadowy outlines.

"Hands up," Zimmerman ordered in a whisper. They complied raising their hands about their heads. "Have either of you seen a private come through here?" The two remained quiet. "I said 'have either of you seen a private come through here?'" Zimmerman said a little more forcefully.

"Hey asshole," One of them whispered back. "Your friend hear told us not to talk." Zimmerman casted a sideways glance at Vilan.

"It is true I told them not to speak," Vilan explained.

"Alright you can talk," Zimmerman said with a sigh. "So have you seen him."

No," The recruit said. In fact until you two assholes came barging in here pointing weapons at us we haven't seen anyone." Disappointment filled his heart then he noticed their voices sounded odd. Keeping his right hand on the pistol's grip and aimed at the recruits his left hand went to the front of the pistol and clicked on the light that was mounted under the barrel. The cone of white light landed on the two recruits and caused them both to shut their eyes.

"Holy shit they do exist," Zimmerman gasped. He had heard rumors about mixed companies be had dismissed them. Now he understood why they weren't allowed anywhere near this barracks this was a female barracks. The two recruits on fireguard where both female as were all the others sleeping soundly in the bay. The two were not the prettiest of woman especially since their hair was a mess, they had dark circles under their eyes from sleep deprivation and couldn't wear any makeup to cover it up, and the UNSC marine uniform wasn't the most flattering of outfits. Still they were both slender and Zimmerman could see just a hint of breast underneath their uniform jackets. It was the fact that he had spent god knows how long living, eating and showering with all dudes that just seeing them caused him to get a partial erection. Also he had forgotten all etiquette and didn't know if he should salute them, kiss them or fall and knee before them.

"You've act like you've never seen a girl before," One of them said as their eyes adjusted to the light.

"And get that damn light out of our faces," The other ordered.

"Ah sorry," Zimmerman said lower the pistol so the light was on their torsos but the pistol was still pointed at them. He tried to think of something smooth and cool to say but could come up with nothing.

"My apologizes," Vilan said still aiming at the two. "But we really must find our comrade."

"Will like I told your friend here," She said turning to face Vilan able to see him because of the light. It was her turn to gasp this time. "Holy shit his does exist."

"What?" Her partner asked turned to look at Vilan her jaw dropping. "The Elite marine." Like Zimmerman who had heard rumors of female marines everyone else had heard rumors of the Elite marine. The two looked him up and down and one whispered something to the other in her ear who blushed lightly and then smiled evilly.

"Seems like you have quite a problem here," The one with the evil smile said. "Losing a comrade and sneaking into a female barracks with weapons you're not allowed to have."

"Look we know he's here," Zimmerman pleaded. "Just let us go look for him and then we're gone. That why we have these pistol and stun rounds, he's coming back if he wants to or not."

"And what is stopping us from informing our DIs once you leave," Evil smile demanded crossing her arms. After seeing no repercussions towards her partner for moving her arms the other dropped her arms as well and let them hang by her sides.

"We'll just dart you, you don't know who we are," Zimmerman said raising his pistol a little higher.

"True," Smiley said. "But how many other Elite marines are around here? You want our silence who have to buy it."

"Fine what do you want?" Zimmerman asked jumping at the opportunity to strike a deal. "Money? I didn't bring any with me but if just let us get this guy I swear to god I'll bring it back." The two woman looked at each other and smiled before they looked back over at Vilan.

"We don't want your money," Smiley said. "We want him to whip it out." Zimmerman's jaw dropped in shock as he stared at the two as Vilan wore a look of confusion on his face being unfamiliar with the term. It was true that men in basic training all being deprived of sex and most of even seeing a woman for mouths that made them incurably desperate. However the same could be said for women no matter how much they may deny it. It boiled down to the simply wanting something that you couldn't have.

"What do they want from me?" Vilan asked Zimmerman in a very quiet whisper.

"They want you to ahh...they want you to..uhm you to show them your penis," Zimmerman said.

"My what?" Vilan asked not knowing what his friend meant.

"Oh right sorry," Zimmerman tried to think of a different and neutral term. "Your mating organ?"

"What? Why?" Vilan demanded even more confused.

"Well we're waiting," Smiley said with her arms still crossed.

"One second," Zimmerman said keeping his pistol on the two as he turned back to Vilan. "Look man just do it so we can grab Decker and get the fuck out of here."

"But mine is not like yours," Vilan explained. "It stays inside of me until it's needed."

"Really?" Zimmerman asked raising an eyebrow. "How do you piss?"

"May we focus on the task at hand?" Vilan asked.

"Right sorry," Zimmerman said facing the women again and flashing a finger indicating one more minute. The two rolled their eyes. "Is there any way you can take it out? Because if not we're going to have to cut our losses, dart these two, and hope they don't remember us which is highly unlikely."

"I can if I become sexual stimulated," Vilan explained.

"Then can you just think happy thought and pull it out them?" Zimmerman asked.

"I might be able to," Vilan said lowering his pistol and closing his eyes. Zimmerman turned to look at the two women again and coughed awkwardly.

"As you can see he's not quite human," Zimmerman explained. "So it's not as simple as 'whipping it out'."

"Well he better do something," Smile said. "Otherwise you can kiss your chances of being marines goodbye."

"This is it just going to take a little bit," Zimmerman looked over at Vilan who had his eyes closed and was rubbing the tips of his fingers together. It was hearing that he might not become a marine that caused Vilan to go through with it. After thinking his 'happy' thoughts for awhile he unzipped his pants and pulled it out. Zimmerman averted his eyes but couldn't help but to risk a glance as morbid curiosity over took him. It was gray the same color of his skin expect a little lighter around the tip, the tip was more pointed and didn't mushroom out like his did. Along the shaft were flesh rings that stood out reminding Zimmerman of iron rings around old wooden barrels. Zimmerman's next thought was: 'good for you', for it wasn't really erect, yet it was slightly bigger than his fully erect. Zimmerman quickly looked away again hoping that the women hadn't seem him look at it, to his relief they were too busy staring at Vilan. He stood with it hanging out unsure of what to do now as he rubbed the back of his head. He felt horribly uncomfortable and grabbed it about to put it away when Smiley spoke.

"Hold up there," She ordered. "I want to feel it."

"That wasn't part of the deal," Zimmerman protested.

"I don't care," Smiley said. "I hold all the cards." Zimmerman's hand tighten around the pistol's grip in anger as he realized she was right, he was the one that was armed and she was the one with the power it wasn't fucking fair. Smiley walked up to Vilan who stared at the ceiling as he rubbed the back of his head and coughed awkwardly

like Zimmerman had done. She reached out a hand and gently lifted it up and started to slowly stroke it. Vilan gasped in surprise as he looked down at her as she looked up at him and smiled her evil smile. Zimmerman wore a look of deep shock on his face and turned to look away quickly.

"We don't have time for this we have to find Decker and get out of here," Zimmerman said. "Before yours and mine DIs do a head count."

"I've got your head count right here," Smiley said increasing her speed. Zimmerman winced at his poor word choice and then sighed loudly.

"Fine go look for him," Smiley said. "Mills go with him."

"Let's go hot shot," Mills said walking around the fireguard desk and over to Zimmerman. "Where is he?" Zimmerman lead them to the short hallway passing the bathroom, against his better judgment leaving Vilan behind with Smiley to do god knows what.

"He came in the back using the DIs hallway," Zimmerman explained and before she could ask him how he knew it. "We followed his muddy footprints all the way here. The guy's an idiot so he probably didn't wipe his feet so we can find easily." Zimmerman opened the door and shook his head sadly already able to see the muddy footprints. Sighing he followed them the short distance as they disappeared under a door set into the hallway.

"What's behind this door?" Zimmerman asked Mills.

"A closet were we keep extra cleaning supplies," Mills explained.

"Where's the DI on duty?" Was Zimmerman's next question.

"Up stairs," Mills said. Zimmerman nodded this was all he need to know.

"Do me a favor and open the door please?" Zimmerman asked Mills as he squared himself up with the door and held the pistol at his waist. Mills stood off to the side and yanked the door open as Zimmerman brought the pistol up. What he saw infuriated him. Decker had his back to them, his PT shorts was around his ankles, receiving head from some other female recruit. Both were unaware the door had been opened as Decker grunted in lust. Zimmerman heisted just long enough to take this all in before he fired two stun rounds into Decker's back, his pistol making two high pitched, quiet snaps. Decker's muscles locked up and he fell forward on to her. She let out a surprised gasp and pushed him off of her as she stood up as he fell to the floor. She saw Zimmerman holding the pistol then and opened her mouth to scream, before she could make a sound something hit her in the stomach and she fell next to Decker. Zimmerman fired twice more into the back of Decker's neck and once more into the woman's stomach. Tucking the pistol back into his belt he pulled out the roll of duct tape as he knelt next to Decker. After he carefully pulled Decker's trunks back up, he bond his hand, his legs and stuffed a dust rag into his mouth, he had gotten from one of shelves, before sealing it with more tape. He grabbed Decker by the wrists and dragged him out into the hallway.

"You know her?" Zimmerman asked Mills pointing at the girl unable to move on the floor.

"Yeah," Mills said with a sigh. "She's with second platoon a real screw up can't do anything right." A match made in heaven Zimmerman thought.

"Can you see that see gets back to her bay?" Zimmerman asked as he dragged Decker back into the bay. "You also might want to clean up the mud." Mills nodded as she went into the closet to grab her. Zimmerman dragged Decker back into the sleeping bay leaving him by the fireguard desk. He looked up and saw Vilan and Smiley had not moved from their position. Smiley had sped up her monition as Vilan watched her looking like he had been hypnotized. His member had grown significantly making Zimmerman feel horribly inadequate and very self-conscious. Sighing he pulled his pistol again and pressed the end of the silencer to the back of Smiley's neck.

"Somebody's jealous," Smiley said in a mocking tone.

"Maybe a little," Zimmerman admitted. "But we have what we came for and now we need to get back quickly."

"Fine I got what I want," Smiley said letting go of Vilan's member and backing away from him. Vilan blinked a few times and shook his head as if he had just woken from a dream. He looked down at his erect penis and quickly stuffed back inside his pants. He then walked over to Decker picked him up and threw him over his shoulder as Decker hung there limply as he was unable to move.

"We appreciate your cooperation," Vilan said as Zimmerman held the bay door open for him.

"Anytime," Smiley said leaning her back against the desk as Mills returned from her task. After making sure no one was around the two privates ran out of the bay and back around the building with Vilan carrying Decker. They reached the fence and both looked over at Decker as he lay on Vilan's shoulder.

"I'll climb over you toss him to me then I'll catch him," Zimmerman explained as he climbed the fence. He dropped down on the other side and looked around, seeing nothing signaled for Vilan to toss Decker. Vilan lifted him up and threw him over the fence Zimmerman didn't even make an attempt to catch Decker as he hit the soft grass with a muted thud. Vilan looked at him crossly as he jumped the fence and landed on the other side.

"Whoops," Was all Zimmerman said as Vilan picked Decker back up. They made it back to their barracks without incident only to find that the back door was locked. Having no choice they circled around and Zimmerman peeked into the C.T.A. He saw the CQ runners and looked at his watch it was 0050 they should be leaving to wake up their replacements anytime now. No sooner then he finish that thought then the two first platoon pricks got up and walk inside their bay. "Go now!" Zimmerman said in a loud whisper for they didn't have long. The two ran as fast as they could go without making too much noise making a bee line for the stairs. They climbed them quickly taking them two at a time. They reached the balcony and closed the short distance to their bay door, yanked it open and got inside just as Zimmerman heard

a bar door open below them. Zimmerman caught the door and let it close slowly and silently.

"We have returned," Vilan said dropping Decker to the floor.

"Yeah," Zimmerman said panting his heart hammering in his chest from the stress of the entire situation. "And we got the bastard." That when he noticed how quiet everything was, not that it was loud at night but there was at least one person who snored, not to mention the tiny squeezed the bunks made when someone tossed and turned. Zimmerman then saw that the lights were on and he hadn't noticed for they had just come from a well lit area. He looked over at Vilan and saw him standing motionlessly at the position of attention and he wasn't the only one the entire platoon was standing toe to line not moving a muscle even Stone and Hook who were on fireguard. In the middle of the kill zone stood Drill Instructor Willy and Zimmerman immediately snapped to attention. He then noticed that Willy himself was standing at the position of attention himself and he then saw why.

Lieutenant Colonel Jackson had her face next to his ear and her mouth was open as if she was yelling but no sound came as she stared at the two privates carrying a third private that was bound and gagged. Off to the side but still in the kill zone stood Sergeant Major Wells, the battalion sergeant major. It was clear to Zimmerman that they had someone how found out that Decker went AWOL found two more privates missing and Willy was getting his ass chewed in front of the whole platoon. She closed her mouth backed away from Willy and moved slowly towards Zimmerman and Vilan.

"Privates Jones and Zimmerman could you please explain to me what exactly you are doing outside your bunks, yet alone your barracks after lights out?" She asked her voice strangely calm. "Since I can't seem to get an answer from you senior drill instructor." Zimmerman swallow hard but it was pointless for his throat had become dry as he tried to think about his answer. It was Vilan that spoke for both of them.

"We were completing a training excursion ma'am," Vilan said.

"Say again Private Jones," Jackson ordered as she moved closer to him. Vilan gulped to buy himself an extra second of time. He wanted an answer that didn't get himself, Willy or Zimmerman in trouble but didn't want Decker to get off as well.

"At 0001 hours ma'am Private Decker left his bunk to use the latrine," Vilan explained not even daring to blink as the lieutenant colonel got closer to him. "At 0010 hours Private Stone noticed that Private Decker had not returned to his bunk and went to investigate. He found that Private Decker had left the barracks and immediately informed Drill Instructor Willy."

"Oh really?" Jackson asked turning towards Willy.

"Yes ma'am," Vilan said. "Drill Instructor Willy then woke myself and Private Zimmerman up. He informed us of the current situation, he knew Private Decker had gone and informed us he wanted us to see if we could find him and bring him back before 0100 hours ma'am. Which we did ma'am." She looked at Willy, then back at Vilan, over to Zimmerman and finally to Decker who was on the floor still not able



to move.

"You have one hell of a recruit here," Jackson said turning towards Willy. "Coming up with a lie that quickly and only getting one of you in trouble. However since everyone is accounted for that is how my report will read to General Fox. You will all sign statements stating what Private Jones had said is true. All of you Privates Stone, Hook, Jones, Zimmerman and Decker. If you do not there will be a full court marshal and you Private Decker will spend time in prison. If you sign the statement you, Private Decker, will be discharged from the UNSCMC under less than honorable circumstances and you may never enlist again but will not have to serve out a prison sentence. Is that understood?" Decker managed to move his head up and down.

"Privates Jones and Zimmerman upon signing your statements you will have one month's pay withheld and this incident will go on your record for five years but you will still graduate with this company on time. Do you understand?" Jackson asked.

"Yes ma'am," Vilan and Zimmerman said in unison.

"Privates Stone and Hook you will be placed on extra duty for a week after signing your statements but there will be no mention of this incident in your records. Understand?" Jackson asked facing the two.

"Yes ma'am," Hook said on their behalf.

"The rest of you will forget this incident every occurred do you all understand?" Jackson asked her eyes sweeping around the bay.

"Yes ma'am," The platoon shouted in unison.

"Good," Jackson walking back over to Willy. "Then all of you back into your racks and go to sleep. As for you gunnery sergeant I want you in my office five minutes ago."

"Ma'am yes ma'am," Willy said.

"Carry on," Jackson said as she left through the bay door followed by Wells and Willy. Stone turned the lights back off as everyone climbed back into the bunks. Zimmerman and Vilan carried Decker to his bunk removed his bonds and gag. Before he left Zimmerman shot him three more times with the pistol he was very happy that Jackson didn't see he had. Stone already had the weapon rack opened and the two removed the magazines and silencers before they placed them back inside and locked it up again. None of them said a word as Vilan and Zimmerman climbed back into their bunks and drifted back to sleep surprisingly quicker than they thought they would have.

## 8. Night of the Bunny

Private Zimmerman stood naked staring at Stone's back who was also naked, and behind him was another naked fourth platoon recruit. The entire platoon stood completely naked as they slowly filed into the training cryo bay. Willy had made it clear that the UNSC had disposable skin suits that can be used in cryo sleep but they weren't going to let a bunch of recruits use their expensive suits for a training excursion. Then normal cloths irritated the skin causing

rashes, 'freezer burns', and other complications. So that is why they were going into the cryo tubes naked as they slowly filed into the cryo bays. Although the recruits of fourth platoon found this degrading and made them uncomfortable their numerous shower drills not to mention their first night down range, they had become accustomed to such things. The recruits gave each other plenty of room and stood staring at back of the head of the person in front of them. However filing next to them into the adjacent cryo bay was first platoon and it was clear that they were truly uncomfortable as they stared at the ground and covered themselves with their hands while trying to stay at the position of attention.

"Hey," Zimmerman whispered out of the corner of his mouth. A first platoon recruit from the line next to him flicked his eyes in the direction of Zimmerman. "Yeah you."

"What?" The recruit asked whispering out the corner of his mouth. This was something that all the recruits were becoming very skilled at.

"What'd you do for your shower drills?" Zimmerman asked thinking they should have been used to marching around naked.

"What's a shower drill?" The first platoon recruit asked.

"Never mind," Zimmerman said after he had a moment of clarity: Willy was truly crazy. Zimmerman stepped into the cryo bay following Stone and up to a cryo pod and stood next to it. He looked down the line and could easily spot Vilan as he stood next to a pod that was just barley taller than him. Once every recruit was standing next to a pod Willy, who was standing in the middle of the bay, spoke.

"Alright here's your mission brief," Willy said. "You are on a ship heading to a planet where a ground conflict is taking place. For this training scenario you'll be following the very likely real world scenario of landing at a FOB and convoying to a COP to reinforce and resupply them. There are unconfirmed reports of enemy opposition along the route to the COP. Also since this is a training exercise we only have enough vehicles for one platoon to complete it at a time. We'll be going in platoon order so you're last once again. The minimum time that you need to spend in cryo sleep to ensure no complications arise is 30 minutes. So you all get to stay in it for a few hours as the other platoons finish the exercise. Don't say I never did anything for you. Alright into your coffins." Zimmerman climbed into his cryo pod and pressed his back against the form fitting gel bed. He felt a cold breeze hit his face and felt calm even as the hatch closed and he was sealed in. As second later the pods were filled with gases and the recruits of fourth platoon entered cryo sleep. Up in the control booth with the navy cryo tech was First Sergeant Peterson who was soon joined by Drill Instructor Willy.

"You get them all tucked in gunny?" Peterson asked.

"You bit top," Willy said sitting down and looking out the window into the bay.

"They are successfully in cryo stasis," The tech reported. "No anomalies."

"Excellent," Peterson said. "Now why don't you take a break."

"I have to monitor their vital signs," The tech said.

"We can do that," Willy said. "We'll let you know if anything arises." The tech still looked unsure.

"Take a break Swabbie," Peterson said a little more forcefully.

"You got it...top?" The tech said trying to repeat what Willy had called Peterson as he stood up and left. Peterson took the tech's seat and sat down.

"So I have read the official report about Decker," Peterson said joining Willy as they looked out the window. "I want to hear the unofficial report."

"Off the record?" Willy asked staring out the window.

"Of course," Peterson said.

"The beginning of the report was right," Willy started. "Decker left his bunk around 0001 hours and told the fireguard he was going to the bathroom. Then at 0013 the fireguard woke up the PG."

"Why did it take them so long to notice he was missing?" Peterson asked.

"If I was a betting man I say he told them he was going to jack it or something and some money might have exchanged hands to buy him the 10 minute head start," Willy explained. "Anyway I heard the motherfucker leave around 0004 since the back doors send off a silent alarm. I had a pretty good idea where he was going since he just left in his PTs. I pulled up some barracks extern camera feeds to confirm my theory."

"That still makes me laugh," Peterson said with a chuckle. "They really don't think we can't see what they're doing. Remember when there was cameras in the barracks as well instead of just the outside?"

"Yeah," Willy said. "So after I knew where he went I saved the footage for evidence in his court marshal. I then went back to filling out my very important paper work and daily reports."

"What level you on?" Peterson asked chuckling again.

"Four," Willy admitted. "Then about 15 minutes later the door alarm went off again. I pulled up the camera feed and want do I see, Private Jones and Zimmerman dress in uniform and staring at the ground. Next thing I see they start heading in the direction of Decker. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that they were going after him and were following his trail of footprints left in the mud."

"One thing I'm a little unclear on is how Decker got into the barracks without being noticed?" Peterson asked.

"The female he was meeting jammed the back door preventing it from locking," Willy explained. "Once he went in the door locked again

however."

"So how did Jones and Zimmerman make it in without being seen by the CQ runners?" Peterson asked.

"Some DI might have made a call to them and sent them on a trip to supply to find a box of grid squares," Willy explained.

"Classic," Peterson remarked with another chuckle. This was a task that was used to keep recruits busy for hours as boxes of grid squares do not exist.

"Long story short they snuck into the barracks, shot Decker full of stun rounds and dragged him back," Willy said.

"Stun rounds?" Peterson asked.

"It seems someone broke into the weapons rack and Jones and Zimmerman took a pistol each and a magazine of stun rounds," Willy said.

"They were going to bring him back come hell or high water weren't they," Peterson remarked. "Who was able to break into the weapons?"

"If I was a betting man," Willy said. "I would say Private Stone. Despite what they think we really do run background checks and Stone was suspected in several high-end robberies but nothing was proven."

"You really got yourself an A-team of recruits this cycle," Peterson said turning to face Willy for the first time. "A deserter fuck up, a theft, a by the book OSC candidate, and an Elite."

"And I have you to thank for it," Willy said still staring out the window.

"Your welcome," Peterson getting up and walking out. "Get back to work Swabbie." The tech came back in and took his seat. Fourth platoon's two hours passed without event and soon the pods were cracked open and fog rose up from them. Zimmerman peeled his back of the bed his skin feeling sticky. When he stepped out his legs felt weak and he fell to his hands and knees, he wasn't the only one as the rest of the recruits flopped out of the tubes. Zimmerman then started to cough to remove the slime from his throat and lungs as the rest of the platoon joined in. For the next few minutes the cryo bay sounded like a doctor's office waiting room. After that painful task the slime coated recruits got to their feet and looked around for their DIs but couldn't find them. So they looked to their squad leader who saw this and then look to Vilan for direction. Vilan saw the entire platoon look at him and quickly stepped up.

"Proceed to the showers," Vilan said flicking some slime from his arm. "Afterwards be dressed in full kit, have your rucksacks packed, weapons loaded and be ready for departure in 15 minutes. Squad leaders I want your squad inspected and every piece of their gear accounted for."

"Yes PG!" The platoon shouted in unison. They then filed out and towards the showers. Back in the control booth DIs Willy, George and Espenhover watched them file out.

"Shouldn't you be down there to give them orders?" The tech asked.  
"You know like the other drill instructors?"

"We are going to see if they can make their own decisions," Willy explained with crossed arms. "In combat sometimes you have to make decisions on your own since you can easily be cut off from the chain of command. Plus it shows how truly important the chain of command is."

"So it worked since the Elite is giving the orders," The tech said.

"Yes it has sort of worked," Willy explained. "However they have replaced us with the PG letting him make all the decisions which is how the chain of command works but it doesn't help with what we're trying to do. For example it's very easy for the enemy to see who is in charge and cap him. Then what? You've got a bunch of disorganized privates none of whom want to step up and take charge."

"So what are we going to do?" Espenhover asked also with crossed arms.

"I think during the night raid we might just have to pay him a visit before the party really gets started," Willy explained.

"And this has nothing with Bunny who might want payback?" George asked his arms crossed as well.

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind a little pay back," Willy admitted subconsciously rubbing the spot where the stun rounds had hit him. "But the important thing is they learn how to adapt when their first in command is taken out." The tech couldn't see it but all three DIs wore devious grins then. This was the day they had been waiting for, for a long time.

"Wasn't that recruit being a little demanding only giving them 15 minutes to shower and change?" The tech asked.

"Not at all," Willy said turning around and heading towards the door. "I would have only given them 10." In the locker room Zimmerman pulled his rucksack onto his shoulders and hurried to line up with the rest of the platoon. When he fell into the formation Hook inspected him by tugging at his armor, vest and rucksack.

"You have everything?" Hook asked.

"We went over everything last night," Zimmerman said rolling his eyes. "Then we went over them this morning and then Willy had us dump everything out of rucks and repack it before going to take an ice nap." Hook nodded and walked off.

"PG fourth squad all up," Hook told Vilan. Vilan nodded and looked the platoon over since Zimmerman was the last one to join the formation.

"Platoon attention," Vilan ordered the platoon snapped to, smartly even with their 70lb packs on their backs. Vilan executed an about face and saluted. "Sir fourth platoon ready for action." Vilan then saw that DI Willy was not there in fact none of their DIs were there.

Feeling humiliated Vilan dropped his salute and turned to face the platoon again. "Thanks for the warning." This caused the platoon to laugh, it was good to see Vilan loosen up. "Platoon at ease." They spread their legs and placed their hands behind their backs, at least the best they could with their packs. They stayed like that for a few minutes until a sergeant walked in, not a drill instructor just a sergeant.

"Alright fourth platoon," The sergeant started.

"Platoon attention!" Vilan shouted spinning around and saluted. "Fourth platoon prepped and ready for duty sir!"

"Ah right," The young sergeant said returning the salute. "Let's go we're ready."

"Sir yes sir!" Vilan said. "Platoon right face...port arms...forward march." Vilan marched the platoon through the hallways following the sergeant into a hanger where four Pelicans sat waiting.

"Alright PG," The sergeant said. "Heard 'em in."

"Sir yes sir!" Vilan shouted causing the sergeant to flinch. "Open ranks march...drop packs." The platoon took their packs off and held them in their left hands while their right held their rifles. Vilan did this for it would be impossible to sit in the Pelicans' jump seats with their large packs on their backs. "File from the left forward...march." The platoon filed into the Pelicans one squad for each Vilan taking a seat in the first Pelican. Once they were all inside the pilots closed the hatches and they lifted off. They were supposed to be simulating flying in from orbit but the truth was they were still in the base and were just flying from one location to another. Vilan looked at the closed hatch and sighed deeply, as he remembered how his father used to tell him how much he enjoyed flying into combat. Not going into the combat itself but the ride, looking out the open hatch and seeing the landscape fly by. Instead all Vilan saw was the metal hatch of the Pelican's ramp.

"Hey Jones you read me?" A voice asked coming through Vilan's uniforms built in coms.

"Indeed I can my friend," Vilan said via coms recognizing Zimmerman's voice. "Remember you need to say 'over' when finished speaking. over."

"Right," Zimmerman said. "You ready for this?...Over."

"Indeed my friend I am," Vilan said as he picked up his rifle and checked its load. "Are you? Over."

"Hell yes!" Zimmerman said. "Finally going to get some well deserved payback on some DIs!...Right sorry over."

"Maybe this is what the DIs have been waiting for as well," Vilan said. "I believe they might have more combat experience than us combined. Over."

"I guess I didn't think of it like that," Zimmerman said. Vilan was able to hear the concern in his voice even through the coms. "Over."

"I suspected you had not," Vilan said with a single chuckle. "Out." The rest of the 30 minute ride was in silence that was only broken by yells of surprise as the ship jolted as it touched down. A second later the ramp dropped and all the privates were blinded by the sun light that spilled into the rather dark troop compartment.

"LET'S GO ASSHOLES MOVE IT!" Willy shouted as soon as the hatches were open and the ramps had been dropped. The recruits poured from the dropships and hurried to make a formation. As Vilan moved to take charge of the formation he swung his pack onto his back and looked around. They were in a clearing surrounded by trees with nothing but two trucks and four Warthogs waiting to move down a dirt road. The trucks were in-between the 'hogs with two in front and two in the back, a classic tactical vehicle formation.

"PG!" Espenhover shouted to grab Vilan's attention.

"Yes sir!" Vilan shouted snapping to attention.

"Packs in one truck, eight recruits in the 'hogs and the rest of the platoon split between the trucks," Espenhover ordered.

"Yes sir," Vilan then went to find out who wanted to ride in the Warthogs. It turned out they all did mainly to be the gunners. Vilan chose ones he thought he could trust and then the rest went into the trucks. Vilan took the passenger seat of the lead Warthog with Zimmerman as his gunner and a sergeant as a driver. When everyone was situated the convoy moved out down the bumpy road. Zimmerman stood behind the mounted gun his hands resting on the handles. It was heavily modified to fire low caliber stun rounds at a slower, safer rate. Vilan turned his head and shouted to be heard over the engine and the wind wiping by them.

"Be on the lookout for anything and everything!" Vilan shouted.

"Don't worry I will!" Zimmerman shouted back. A moment later both heard a whiz fly between them. "What was that?" Zimmerman demanded.

"In coming fire they are shooting at us!" Vilan shouted. "Left side!"

"Got it!" Zimmerman shouted as he swung the turret to the left. He spotted shapes moving through the trees and opened fire the gun shaking him to the core.

"Gunnery!" Vilan shouted via coms. "Hostiles left!" A second later the rest of the gunners opened up the sound of their firing was deafening. "Passengers eyes right look for others! Whatever you do, do not fire over the drivers!"

"Thanks!" The sergeant driving shouted suddenly. "You're the first one to mention that! I know they're just stun rounds but they hurt like hell to be hit at close range!"

"Anytime sir!" Vilan shouted as he tracked a crouching shape in the trees on the right. He shouldered his rifle, chose the automatic setting and fired a burst at it. The shape suddenly disappeared as it

dropped to the ground. Vilan couldn't tell if it was because he hit it or because it dove to the ground. "Passengers targets right!" Vilan shouted into the coms as he tracked more shapes moving in the trees. Soon nothing could be heard but the sound of the turrets and the chatter of assault rifles. Vilan's bolt locked back on a empty magazine, he dropped it, shoved a new one in, hit the bolt release and re-shouldered the rifle. He went to find more targets but he couldn't find any. In fact the shooting started to taper off as the rest of the passengers and gunners couldn't find targets either. As quickly and suddenly as it had started it stopped just as suddenly as they drove out of the kill zone.

"I think it's over!" Zimmerman shouted carefully.

"Agreed!" Vilan said and then into the coms. "Is anybody hit sound off?!"

"This is 'hog four we're all good over!"

"'Hog three they missed us over!"

"Warthog two nobody's hit over!"

"How are you Zimmerman?!" Vilan asked.

"Missed me by a mile!" Zimmerman said with a grin a mile wide.

"You're also the only one that has done that!" The sergeant remarked.

"You know they would not have been trying to hit you!" Vilan shouted at Zimmerman. "It would be too much of a risk to hit the drivers and cause a wreck! So they shot at us to scare us but not nearly close enough to hit any of us!" Here the sergeant risked a glance over at Vilan taking his eyes from the road.

"You are differently the only one to realize that!" The sergeant shouted truly impressed. The rest of the ride to the COP was without incident as they rolled in the main gate Vilan took in the sights. It was a large clearing still surrounded by trees with a fence running along the perimeter with guard tower spaced along them. The COP had four prefab buildings that were barracks, a command bunker and one large tent that was the mess hall. The vehicles came to a stop in a dirt turn around to let the recruits dismount and grab their packs. Willy showed them to their barracks and had them stash their packs into footlockers. The rest of the day was spent learning how to inspect in coming vehicles and conduct foot patrols. When they got back to their field barracks they were all beat. Vilan knew they didn't want to hear what he had to say but it needed to be addressed none the less.

"We all know what is going to happen tonight agreed?" Vilan asked sweeping his eyes across the platoon as they sat heavily onto bunks.

"Yeah the much discussed night raid," Stone said as he pulled his boots off. "One thing the other company can't shut up about. 'The DIs did this on our night raid, oh yeah well our DIs did this on \_our\_ night raid, well ours did \_this\_."



"Are we also in agreement that with the possible expectation of third platoon we cannot expect much assistance from the other platoons to defend this outpost?" Was Vilan's next question. A mummer of argument went through the platoon.

"Hell I wouldn't trust first platoon with my dog let alone my life," Stone said.

"Very well," Vilan said. "Then I have a course of action that will help ensure we can react quickly to any threat, however it means we are all going to have to sacrifice sleep."

"Better to be 'alive' and tired then be 'dead' and well rested," Stone remarked a second later. A cheer of agreement went up.

"Very well," Vilan said before he laid out his plan.

Later that same night at 0134 hours Willy lead George and Espenhover into the camouflaged tent hidden in the trees a click from the outpost. They weren't wearing their normal clean and pressed uniforms but worn and weathered ones and instead of their brown rounds they wore stocking caps. Willy held the tent's flap open to allow George and Espenhover into the tent before going in himself. Inside were the rest of the platoons' DIs, a folding table with laptop computer setting on it, a rack of assorted weapons and boxes of stun rounds.

"Now that we're all here," First Sergeant Peterson said. "We can get the run down." There were cameras all around the COP including inside the barracks, expect for the showers and bathrooms, to give the DIs even more of an advantage.

"Alright," Peterson said bring up the COP on to a holo table. "First and second platoons, expect with their recruits in the guard towers they only have a fireguard inside their barracks so they should be easy to box in and crush. Third platoon can give us a little more trouble as they have ones in guard towers, along with roaming guards and a fireguard inside their barracks. However fourth platoon is the most problematic. What have you done to them Willy?"

"Just trying to prepare them for combat the best I can," Willy said with a shrug.

"I'll say," Peterson remarked. "Not only do they have roamers, recruits in a tower and a fireguard inside their barracks but they have a squad up and already in full battle rattle. I think it's a quick reaction team." This got low whistles from the rest of the DIs and Willy still wore a stone face but on the inside his chest welled up with pride.

"One squad's been up the whole time?" First platoons senior DI asked. "They got to be tired."

"No they have been rotating pulling two hour shifts," Peterson explained. "One wakes up then the other goes back to sleep the other guards and pulled from the squads the farthest from being the reaction team. They don't get to much sleep but they do get equal sleep."

"Let's just hit them during a shift change," One DI suggested. "When one goes to bed and the other is still getting ready."

"That would work if they were doing it like that," Peterson said. "But their doing it right the on duty team only even, starts to undress only after the incoming team is in full battle rattle and in place."

"Jesus Willy what have you been doing to them at night?" A DI demanded this getting laughs from the others. Willy just shrugged.

"Is Private Jones up?" Willy asked.

"Actually yes," Peterson said. "He is the tower with Private Zimmerman."

"I say we hit 'em now," Willy said. "It's not going to get any easier."

"Willy's right," Peterson said. "Give 'em hell gentlemen." The DIs grabbed weapons, flashbangs, stun grenades, flares, duct tape, rope and other such gear. Willy left the tent with Espenhover and George, they clutched assault rifles while Willy held a DMR. The three DIs reached up to their stocking caps and pulled them down over their faces their caps actually rolled up balaclavas. George and Espenhover placed goggles over their eyes that caused HUDs to appear over their eyes while Willy pulled a white rabbit mask over his face. The three started towards the COP and the (kind of) unsuspecting privates within.

Up in a tower overlooking the COP Vilan peered into the trees while Zimmerman sat and ate some crackers from a MRE. Normally in a guard tower there were mounted gun with spotlights. In their tower however there was a mounting rack for a turret but no turret. They had spotlights but didn't have power to them plus one of them had a broken bulb.

"See anything?" Zimmerman asked crumbs falling from his mouth.

"The night impedes my vision," Vilan explained.

"So no?" Zimmerman asked spitting more crumbs.

"Indeed," Vilan said.

"PG this is barracks fireguard," A disembodied voice said into Vilan's ear. "Checking in 0145 all clear. Over."

"Understood out," Vilan said. He then waited for the roamer pair to check in but they didn't. "Tower to roamers do you copy?" Vilan got nothing but static and this cause Zimmerman to stand up holding his rifle tight. "Barracks fireguard this tower get two replacements over here we are going to check on the roamers. Over."

"Copy that," The voice said. "You think this is it? Over."

"Uncertain," Vilan admitted. "Get our replacements over here and make the on duty team aware of this situation over."

"You got it PG fireguard out," The voice said. A few moments later two fourth platoon recruits that were on the reaction team came jogging over and climbed the ladder of the tower. Once up there Vilan and Zimmerman climbed down and marched over to the roamer's route and walked along it at a quick pace. It didn't take them long to find them, they were lying face down in the tree line. Here Vilan made his first mistake as he rushed over to them and rolled one of them over. He could tell they had been hit by stun rounds with how stiff their limbs were.

"Zimmerman call it in," Vilan ordered as he checked the other roamer. Zimmerman remained quiet however causing Vilan to look behind him. When he did he saw Zimmerman on his knees with two masked men behind him. One had his assault rifle pressed into the side of Zimmerman's neck the other was pointing his at Vilan. Vilan stole a glance at his own rifle that he had placed on the ground to check the roamers.

"Don't even think about it," A voice whispered as the barrel of a DMR was placed into Vilan's back. Vilan raised his hands above his head slowly and stood up. "Let's go for a walk." Vilan turned around and saw Bunny was the one that held him hostage. Vilan placed his hands on his head as the two privates were marched into the woods by the three men. Once they were a good distance from the COP Bunny shot them both in the leg. Zimmerman's and Vilan's muscles locked up and they fell to the ground unable to move. The three men then bound their feet and hands and placed tape across Zimmerman's mouth. For Vilan they taped his mandibles together as if he had a tooth ache starting the tape on one side of his face looping under his chin and stopping on the other side. It looked strange but he wouldn't be able to talk(they had done this before with other Elites in combat). They then moved them into a sitting position with their backs against a tree and used rope to tie them to it.

"Gentlemen," Bunny said in his usual whisper tone. "The effects of the rounds will wear off soon which is good because I want you be able to enjoy this. I want you to know you did everything right PG, it's just sometime shit happens. I will leave your coms so you can hear the chaos we will bring upon this outpost. Without you telling your platoon what to do I fear they will not fair to well." With that the three men turned and left them tied to that tree as they headed to the outpost. Bunny keyed his throat mike.

"Update," He demanded.

"First and second platoon barracks infiltrated," A voice whispered into his ear. "Fireguard neutralize the rest of the bastards haven't woken up."

"Third platoon's roamers taken care of," A new voice said. "Moving to infiltrate barracks now."

"Outstanding," Bunny said as the three men neared the outpost. "Let it begin." Bunny sighted his DMR and fired twice scoring two hits on both privates in a tower, the silencer making it so the shots went unheard. Meanwhile the DIs inside of first, second and third platoons' barracks opened fired on the sleeping recruits. This woke the ones that weren't hit up and caused them to yell as their weapons weren't silenced like Bunny's. Inside of fourth platoon's barracks

they all heard the shots and screams.

"LET GO EVERYONE UP WERE UNDER ATTACK!" Hook shouted. The recruits were instantly aware and rushed to don what armor and cloths they could. Meanwhile the reaction team rushed out and took up defensive positions around the barracks and immediately started to take fire from the masked DIs. They took cover and returned fire forcing the DIs to take cover themselves. As the rest of fourth platoon got dressed they trickled outside to join the fight.

"PG we're under attack orders?" Hook asked into his com still inside the barracks. He received nothing but static. "PG respond please."

"I think he might be down," Stone said holding his rifle with white knuckles.

"Then I'm in charge," Hook announced. "What I want you to do-"

"Wait a second," Private Valentine said cutting Hook off. "I'm first squad leader so I'm next in line."

"But I have more experience than you," Hook challenged.

"What just because you went to collage means you know more about combat than me?" Valentine Demanded getting closer to Hook.

"We are pinned down out here!" A frantic voice said over the coms. "First and second platoons are down! They are gone man! Third platoon is pinned in their barracks and they got us nailed down as well! Orders!?" Hook and Valentine did not hear him but Stone did and he was the only recruit left in the barrack expect for Hook and Valentine.

"Guys it doesn't matter they need our help," Stone said trying to play peacemaking. But they weren't having any of it as they continued to argue. Stone sighed heavily as he ran outside into the night air. Stun rounds started to fly past his head as he dove behind a small wall of sandbags joining two other recruits.

"Sitrep?" Stone asked as one of the recruits fired at the masked men.

"We are truly fucked," The one not shooting said.

"RELOADING!" The one shooting said as he ducked back behind the sandbags.

"FIRING!" The one that hadn't been shooting said rising up and shouldering his rifle to fire at the DIs.

"I agree," The other said as he reloaded. "First and second platoons are gone, I mean completely gone. Third is not too far behind and soon they will be focused just on us."

"RELOADING!"

"FIRING!" The two exchanged positions again. "We are already surrounded and pinned down. We are keeping them back but just barely and they are still inching closer."

"RELOADING!"

"FIRING!" They swapped spots again. "They really can't get good shots on us and we can't really hit them," The one not shooting explained. "Two things are going to happen: they are either going to get close enough to start picking us off and overrun us or we are going to run out of ammo and then they are going to overrun us." Stone took this all in and made a snap decision.

"Alright," Stone said. "You two with me we're going to flank them."

"Why not," One of the said. Moving in a crouch Stone lead the small group towards the other side off the barracks picking up a few more recruits along the way. They reached a point where the sandbags ended and they would have to cross open ground to reach the next piece of cover.

"Alright," Stone said. "Let's go!" The recruits dashed from cover and were almost safely behind their new cover when Bunny and his two henchmen rose up and gunned them all down. Since they were caught in the open they didn't stand a chance. After they were all down Bunny walked up and knelt next to Stone so he could whisper in his ear.

"Moving to flank," He said. "An understandable move but poor execution. Remember if you have to dash from cover you need someone to give you covering fire. I think this is a lesson you won't forget." A pair of recruits had heard the shots and cry's of Stone's 'team' and went to investigate sticking their heads above the sandbags and saw the three masked men. They fired but they were already flustered and missed hitting the ground in front of them. The men opened fire and got of them, the other ran away.

"WE CAN'T HOLD FALL BACK TO THE BARRACKS!" He screamed. Then some of the recruits agreed and followed him back inside while the others stayed outside. The gaps in fire let the ones outside get outflanked and gunned down. However when two masked DIs tried to enter the barracks they were each hit many times caught in a textbook cross fire from the recruits, these were the first casualties of the DIs that night. Two of their comrades dragged them out of the way as the rest surround the barracks as they prepared to lay siege to it. However one DI threw in a pair of flashbangs and another threw in two stun grenades. The rest of them rushed in after they went off. Gunshots echoed through the building as they gunned down the still blind privates.

Meanwhile still tied to the tree Vilan had heard everything via the coms and felt like a complete failure. Zimmerman could tell that he was upset even though it was just a training exercise facing a highly superior enemy. He wanted to say something to comfort him but couldn't due to the tape across his mouth. The sound of boots crunching on leaves caused the two to look up. Bunny was walking towards them and then knelt down so he was face to face with Vilan.

"Your platoon held out the longest," Bunny explained. "But they fell none the less. They really had a chance to turn the tide with your reaction team on duty but the leaders butted heads on who would be in

charge leaving the rest without orders. Then mistakes were made and we took advantage of them. The good news is that your platoon now realizes how much they rely on you." Bunny united them then and they stood up as Bunny hand them their rifles after he unloaded them. "Go back to the barracks and get some sleep. No more fireguard, no more roamers just go to sleep. We won't attack you again, and you all have a long day tomorrow." Vilan and Zimmerman removed their gags but didn't say anything as they walked back to the outpost. The two saw the aftermath of the raid: spent shell casings everywhere, blackened patches of dirt from sim grenades, and recruits dragging their still limp comrades back inside. Vilan and Zimmerman walked inside their barracks and saw the platoon in different states of dress and most climbed into bunks rubbing the areas where the stun rounds had hit them.

"Go to sleep," Vilan ordered. "No fireguard, no guards what so ever. They will not be attacking us again."

"So where the hell were you?" Hook demanded.

"Bunny tied us to a tree and left us their during the whole raid," Zimmerman explained.

"Oh," Was all Hook said.

"Now go to fucking sleep it's going to be a long day tomorrow," Zimmerman said as he flopped down on his bunk. Vilan crawled into his bunk and closed his eyes but sleep would not come for a long time as he thought about what Bunny had said.

## 9. Day of the Elite

Vilan ducked his head to avoid hitting it on yet another tree branch and he moved through the forest. He risked a glance behind him to check on the rest of the platoon and saw they were still spread out in wedge formation and they were all accounted for. Satisfied he turned back around in time to be smacked in the face by a thin twig greedily holding onto many leaves forcing it to droop. Vilan grunted in disgust as he ducked his head after the fact and turned to look at Drill Instructor Willy as he led them deeper into the forest. Willy had woken them the morning after the night raid, told them to get dress and to pack their rucks. The other platoons had done the same and just as the sun was starting to come up the platoons' DIs lead them off in four different directions. Now it was closer to midday and the sun beat down upon them mercilessly. Vilan removed a hand from his rifle and used it to wipe sweat that had worked its way from under his helmet on to his forehead and pooled were the top of his goggles were pressed to his face. That complete his hand returned to his rifle his finger lightly resting on the trigger. Vilan almost ran into Willy then as he had come to a stop.

"Here PG," Willy said his back still to him. Vilan took two steps so he was standing beside Willy.

"Reporting as ordered sir," Vilan said without a salute because they were in the field. They were told to never salute in the field or any kind of combat situation for all it did was identify officers and persons of importance to the enemy.

"No," Willy said as he pointed at the ground. "Here is where we make camp." Vilan looked around at the uneven ground, fallen trees and various trees that made up their campsite. It definitely wasn't a clearing of any kind in fact it seemed Willy had picked it at random.

"Where shall we place tents sir?" Vilan asked.

"No tents private," Willy explained. "Everyone has their poncho right?"

"Yes sir," Vilan said looking up at the sun.

"Dig fox holes in a circle at least six feet apart," Willy ordered. "Two pre fox hole your ponchos will be your tent if it rains, understood?"

"Yes sir," Vilan said and then turned to face the rest of the platoon that had horseshoed around the two. "Pick a spot to dig your hole, drop your packs, and proceed to dig your shelter." They stood around a second longer waiting for any other instructions when Willy spoke turning around to face them.

"Let's go assholes you've got a lot of digging to do before night fall," Willy said. This caused the platoon to snap to and to find their battle buddy then go find the location of where they would dig their hole. Vilan made sure each one was at least six feet apart and they made a complete circle with the placements of their holes to ensure every possible approach to the camp was covered. That complete Vilan set his rucksack down next to Zimmerman's, retrieved his E-tool from it(a folding shovel) and jumped into the hole Zimmerman had started.

"Welcome," Zimmerman said as he shoveled more dirt out. "To the five star hotel and resort known as fox hole." Vilan said nothing as he started to dig and remove dirt from the would be fox hole at faster pace than Zimmerman. The two dug in silence for a time the only sound was that of shovels scraping up dirt. "Sooooo." Zimmerman said as he wiped sweat from his forehead careful not to rub the dirt that was stuck to his forearms onto his face.

"Yes my friend?" Vilan asked as he tossed out more dirt.

"This is it," Zimmerman explained. "The moment we have been waiting for: 'toon vs 'toon."

"Indeed," Vilan said. "We must protect our guidon while attempting to capture the other platoon's if we can."

"We have to find each of their camps first," Zimmerman pointed out as he started to dig again.

Agreed," Vilan said. The two dug in silence again when Zimmerman stopped for a moment to look around. No other recruits had them in ear short and if they did they would be too wrapped up in their digging and their own conversations to notice them. He thought he would try again but this time he had some back ground knowledge that gave him a leg to stand on.

"So uhm Jones," Zimmerman said as he started to dig again.

"What do you require my friend?" Vilan asked with his back to Zimmerman as he worked at making the hole a little wider. Zimmerman nervously twisted his E-tool in his hands as he thought how to proceed. He decided the best way was to just come out and say it, he took a deep breath to buy himself a moment of time.

"I know your father was a marine," Zimmerman said.

"I thought we have discussed this before," Vilan said still digging. Zimmerman closed his eyes and winched, he always got like that when he was nervous: messing up his words.

"I mean I know he was a human," Zimmerman said mentally flinching. Vilan stopped digging but still didn't turn around. "I also know he fought in the first Covenant war and then the war with the Brutes. I also know he was a squad leader for a squad of Elllll- I mean Sangheili during the war. Then after, he lived on a...Sangheili planet."

"Is there something you wish to ask me?" Vilan asked his voice toneless his back still towards Zimmerman.

"How did he end up there?" Zimmerman asked.

"His field marshal, the same as a company commander here," Vilan explained driving his E-tool into the ground and leaving it there. "Through battle they had become friends each respected the other greatly. My father's home world was destroyed during the first war after he was, I believe the word is drafted, and all he knew was the crops. So his field marshal officered for him to come live on his planet when the war was over. There he met my mother and I was the result. But what is your actual question?"

"What?" Zimmerman asked starting to feel uncomfortable.

"You do not wish to know how he got there," Vilan explained standing to his full height. "You wish to know why I am here and how he died."

"Yes," Zimmerman admitted. Here Vilan turned around and looked Zimmerman in the eyes.

"He was a humble framer," Vilan explained his eyes starting to glaze over. "His days of fighting were well behind him. He didn't even like to speak of his battles, most tails I heard where from his friend Field Marshal Hamanee. There was a Covenant up rising and we were forced to flee our home. I had never seen my father fight till that day and it made me feel nothing but pride that I was the son of such an honorable and fierce warrior. He and Field Marshal Hamanee gave their lives so we could escape with ours. I wanted to avenge his death so I decided to become a marine like my father before me."

"Oh," Was all Zimmerman could say. "He sounds like a great man."

"He was," Vilan agreed turning back around and started to dig again. The two dug in silence once again. They stayed quiet till they had finished the hole, it was wide enough to fit them both comfortably and was deep enough so only Zimmerman's shoulders and head was



showing when he stood up, it was up to Vilan's upper stomach lower chest. Vilan threw his E-tool and climbed out of the hole and walked over to see who needed help to finish their hole, without saying a word to Zimmerman. Zimmerman watched him go and wondered if he had upset him, that was a stupid question he knew he upset him but would he forgive him? That was the real question.

"Private!" A voice said causing Zimmerman to drop his E-tool as he snapped to attention.

"Sir!" Zimmerman said turning his head to look at DI Willy.

"Inform the PG that due to Decker's bullshit that night," Willy said with crossed arms. "Myself and Drill Instructors George and Espenhover have a meeting with Lieutenant Colonel Jackson. Because of this there will be no NCOs in charge of this platoon for an undetermined amount of time. This being the case his is in charge till we return, during which time no one is to leave this area. If you see any platoon's recruits you are to engage them on sight, understood?"

"Sir yes sir!" Zimmerman said.

"Outstanding," Willy said as he walked away. That left Zimmerman alone again with his thoughts as he picked up his E-tool. He twisted it around in hands nervously as he didn't know if he should go after Vilan or let him cool off. He decided to let him cool as he pretended to work on the fox hole, removing small chunks of dirt and throw it out of the hole. After a few minutes of that Vilan jumped back into hole and sat resting his back against the dirt sweat pouring from under his helmet.

"The rest of the platoon has finished their fox holes," Vilan reported. "Where is DI Willy?"

"Um he had to go see Colonel Jackson," Zimmerman explained. "They all did. "You're in charge again. He said we are to just sit tight and if we see any other recruits we are to shoot them." Vilan nodded and then he keyed his helmet mike.

"Remain in your fox holes," Vilan ordered. "Stay hidden and if you see any hostiles report it immediately." The squad leaders reported that they understood and Vilan and Zimmerman rested their rifles on the lip of the fox hole as they stared into their section of trees. An hour passed and all they could do is drink from their canteens, eat a quick meal of one of their MREs they brought along, and watch the trees. Zimmerman had just pressed his canteen up to his lips to drink again when Vilan spoke for the first time since he had returned.

"How did you know what you do about my father?" Vilan asked peering into the trees. Zimmerman lowered his canteen and recapped it before he clipped it to his belt.

"Remember those marine friends?" Zimmerman asked. "The ones that convinced me it was a good idea to enlist?"

"I recall you speaking of them," Vilan said.

"One of them works in payroll," Zimmerman explained as he pressed his

rifle back into his shoulder and peered into the trees as well. "I sent a request for a personal file of your father, that is what I got the night Decker went missing."

"I see," Vilan said tonelessly. "What information did you acquire?"

"Just his name, where he lived, his dependents and some mission reports," Zimmerman admitted. "I learned he was an outstanding marine. I hope you can forgive me."

"I already have," Vilan said with a sideways glance over to him. "As long as you never mention what you told me to anyone else."

"Deal," Zimmerman said and then he gripped his rifle as he thought about if he should asked his next question or not. He then decided he was already in deep and might as well go for broke. "On the night we went after Decker."

"I thought we agreed to never speak of that night again," Vilan said.

"I know, I know," Zimmerman said. "But I have to know: Did anything else happen between you and Smiley?"

"Who?" Vilan asked confused.

"Right sorry," Zimmerman said with a wave of his hand. "That what I dubbed her. The female recruit that um...you know grabbed your...ah.." He then whistled and pointed at his groin.

"Oh," Vilan said as his face flushed. "She just rubbed it and then she licked it a few times, that was all."

"Good for you," Zimmerman said lightly shoving Vilan's shoulder. The sound of a boot snapping a stick in two cut off Vilan's rebuttal. The two recruits scanned the trees and sighted their rifles looking for the thing that had caused the noise. They heard them rather than saw them first.

"I'm tired of this fucking shit," A rather noisy recruit was saying.

"We've only been walking for 45 minutes," His partner explained.

"Exactly," The complainer said. "They found second in only ten minutes. Wilson and Hunter found third in 25 but at least they had a trail and some clues to follow. We on the other hand have been looking for 45 fucking minutes sweating our asses off and haven't found a goddamn thing."

"The truth be told I don't want to find them," His partner admitted. "Something isn't right about fourth platoon."

"Yeah they are fucking freaks," The complainer said louder then he probably should have.

"You got to be quiet man," His partner said as they walked through the trees.

"They anit fucking around," The complainer said. "Do you see any tents around, plus we're in the middle of fucking trees they would be in a clearing."

"Did you hear that?" His partner asked coming to a complete stop.

"Hear what?" The complainer demanded as he came to a stop as well. Then like a nightmare the entire fourth platoon rose out of the ground, like an undead hoard, already in a circle around them rifles aimed squarely at them. The two first platoon recruits had walked right into the middle of fourth platoon's camp, stopped in the middle and hadn't even noticed.

"Drop 'em," Stone ordered motioning with his rifle. The two first platooners let their rifles fall to the ground and they sheepish raised their hands into the air.

"Restrain them," Vilan ordered. "Then search and strip them." Four recruits stepped forward bound their hands and relieved them of their vest, ammo, and armor then just to be sure they went through all their pockets. That complete they brought them over to see Vilan as he looked through the contents of their pockets.

"Greetings," Vilan said as the two recruits were forced to sit on the ground in front of him. "It seems you have lost your way. We will be happy to return you two, to your rightful platoon after you answer a simple question."

"To bad asshole," The complainer said. "We'll never tell you the location of our platoon."

"Oh you don't have to," Vilan explained. "For I already know." He then showed them a folded map that had been in one of their pockets. The map was of the local area and had three circles on it with numbers: 1, 2, and a 3.

"You marked them on your map?" The complainer's partner asked. "You fucking idiot."

"I didn't want to forget where they were," The complainer said sheepishly.

"So what I wish to know is," Vilan said as he refolded the map and placed it in his own pocket. "Why your PG wants to know all the locations and what is he planning?"

"What makes you think we would ever tell you?" The complainer demanded. Vilan's mandibles twisted into a smile as he reached out and touched the complainer's forehead with the back of his claw.

"Oh no!" Vilan shouted in a mocking tone. "He's burning up! He must be suffering from heat stroke!" Private Zimmerman rushed up and felt his forehead as well.

"Holy shit!" He shouted as well. "He's right!"

"What are you assholes talking about I'm fine," The complainer said not catching on.

"We must treat him right away!" Vilan shouted still in the mocking tone. "Fetch the ice sheets!" With a pleased smile on his own face Private Stone jogged over to the only thing that could have given them away. It was several five gallon plastic water jugs, two large coolers packed to the brim with water and ice and a foldable stretcher. They had covered them with leaves and branches to hide them. The only reason they were there was so the recruits could fill their canteens and to treat victims of heat stroke. With the same smile on his face Stone single handily picked up a cooler and carried it over to where the two first platooners were. Two other recruits grabbed the second cooler as one more grabbed two water jugs. The last thing Hook brought over was the stretcher and he unfolded it and placed it on the ground.

"Last chance," Vilan said.

"Blow me," The complainer said.

"He is delusional!" Vilan shouted the mocking tone returning to his voice. "We must treat him before he loses consciousness!" With that Stone grabbed the complainer's arms and pulled him so he was laying down on his back on the stretcher. Hook grabbed his legs and held them in place as Zimmerman opened one of the coolers.

"What are you bastards doing?" The complainer demanded.

"Treating you for heat stroke," Zimmerman said as he fished around in the cooler his hand becoming numb in the icy water. He pulled out a balled up white bed sheet that had been soaking in the icy water all day. Zimmerman then placed the dripping wet cloth under one of the complainer's knees. With the help of another recruit they placed more balled up sheets under his other knee, his neck, his armpits, the small of his back and his chest. They then unfolded a few of the sheets and covered him in the white cloth. That complete they stood up, grabbed a water jug each and poured water over him the icy sheets making the water extremely cold. This was how you treated a victim of heat stroke, this would lower their body temperature to a much safer level at a very quick rate. However if a person wasn't suffering from heat stroke it would only make them very, very cold and uncomfortable.

"So what is your PG planning?" Vilan asked kneeling next to the complainer's head.

"Fu-uc-fu-fu-c-c-c-c-k-k-k- yo-o-o-o-o-o-u-u-u-u," The complainer said through chattering teeth.

"He still burning up!" Vilan shouted feeling his forehead again. "More water!" With a smile on his lips Zimmerman poured more water on him the icy blast feeling like knives on his skin. Vilan knelt down next to him after he let his teeth chatter for awhile. "Once again what is your PG planning?"

"Fu-u-u-u-" He started.

"More water," Vilan ordered as he stood. The complainer shut up as more water was poured and splashed on.

"Alright I'll tell you," His partner said.

"Yo-o-o-o-o-o-u-u-u-u be-e-e-e-t-t-t-t-t-er-ee-r-er no-t-t-t," The complainer said. Vilan shot a glance over at Zimmerman who happily poured more water onto him.

"Explain," Vilan ordered kneeling down to get face to face with the other first platoon recruit.

"He wanted us to find the others platoons so we could launch a raid and capture their guidons," His partner explained. "We have already taken second's, those pushovers didn't stand a chance. We disappeared back into the forest to our camp they had no idea where we went. Third is going to be a little harder but he was planning an assault on them at dusk. He then sent us to try and find you and maybe hit you at dawn."

"The truth?" Vilan asked.

"Yes," He said lowering his head in shame. "Just leave him alone."

"As you wish," Vilan said and then nodded at Zimmerman who nodded at Stone and Hook. They both let go of the complainer and helped him to his feet and gave him a towel to help dry himself with. Both of their bonds were cut and they were handed back everything that was taken from them expect for their ammo and map.

"You may leave at your discretion," Vilan said as he walked away from them.

"That's it?" The one that had spilled his guts asked.

"Indeed," Vilan said with his back to him.

"Your mother was a whore and your father was a coward!" The complainer shouted a general insult. Vilan had kept walking when he heard the part about his mother but when he mentioned his father he came to a complete and sudden stop. The complainer saw this and knew he had struck a nerve and decided to run with it. "Yeah that's right your father was a fucking coward!" Vilan turned around with a look on his face that no one of fourth platoon had ever seen before: anger. They then heard something that their grandfathers and fathers that had also served described as terrifying: the roar of an Elite before he charged. Vilan continued to roar as he rushed the one who had insulted his father. Once he reached him he reached out and grabbed the front of his still soaking wet uniform and lifted him off the ground so they were face to face.

"You know nothing of my father," Vilan growled.

"His dad's dead dude," Zimmerman said trying to help. "So just back off man."

"Yeah," He grunted still in Vilan's grasp. "My daddy was a sniper I hope he was the one that put the round through the split jaw's head." Vilan was unfamiliar with the insult but knew it was one none the less.

"My father died fighting the Covenant," Vilan sneered.

"Yeah buddy a lot of fathers and sons and daughters and mothers die fighting the Covenant," He gasped. Vilan growled again as he pressed his face against the one that had insulated his father.

"What all this then!" Willy demanded as he stepped into the camp. Vilan let go of the recruit and he fell to the ground with a thud.

"Thank god you're here," The partner of the complainer said. "These monsters captured us and then water boarded him." Willy's eyes sweep around the camp, the two recruits of first platoon, the one that was soaking wet and finally to the ice sheet coolers.

"Is this true PG?" Willy asked. "Report."

"Sir," Vilan said snapping to attention. "The two recruits of first platoon walked into our camp. When then treated one of them for heat stroke and was about to send them on their way sir."

"I see," Willy said. "Why do that? So they can report your location to their superiors? No, when you have a prisoner of war you just simple don't let them go."

"Sir yes sir!" Vilan said and then nodded. Four recruits grabbed the two trespassers and restrained them again.

"What information did you extract from them?" Willy asked.

"Sir the locations of the rest of the platoons," Vilan explained retrieving the map from his pocket and showed it to Willy.

"Outstanding," Willy said. "So how are we going to attack them all?" Here Vilan smiled.

"We don't have to sir," Vilan explained. "From what a POW told me they already have second's guidon and were going to launch an assault on third to steal their guidon. I think they will be able to do it to. I say we recon first platoon see if they do have second's guidon and if they can retrieve third's. If they do I say we hit just them and get all three at once."

"Let someone else do the dirty work and then come in and take the prize," Willy said. "I like it."

"Sir we just have to figure out what we are going to do about the two POWs," Vilan said. "We will need to return them or first platoon will get suspicious."

"You leave that to me PG," Willy said. "Just worry about bringing me my guidons and keeping them till 1200 tomorrow when this exercise is done."

"Sir yes sir," Vilan said as he turned. Ten minutes later Vilan was leading third and fourth squads through the trees while first and second stayed back to defend the camp, although no other platoon knew where it was. The sun was just starting to go down when they neared first platoon's camp and could hear rather than see it first. Vilan had them drop to the ground and low crawl till the camp came into view. Unlike there's first platoon's camp was in an actual clearing

and instead of fox holes they stayed in two person tents. Vilan gave two quick hand signs and the two squads slowly crawled, spreading out to encircle the camp.

"Does anyone see the guidons?" Vilan whispered into his radio.

"Yes," Private Stone whispered into his own radio. "The bastard wasn't lying they do have second's. They're both in the middle of their camp near what looks like a fire pit. I can't see a lot of them around so it could be they are preparing for an assault on third like he said. That or they're all sleeping inside their tents." Vilan had to stop and think: should he hit them now when they are weaker and get two guidons or wait for the rest of them to return bring more numbers but the possibility of a third guidon?

"Ok," Vilan whispered into his mike. "We wait for the others to return to see if they bear third's guidon."

"And if they come back and don't 'bear' third's guidon?" Hook asked via radio.

"Then there are more of them for us to shoot," Vilan explained. This got a few chuckles from the recruits that he couldn't hear due to the distance. So they lay and waited as the sun fell deeper into the sky. None of them moved, most of them even feared to breath as to give themselves away and doom the whole operation. Just as the sun had disappeared from the sky but it's light not quite gone did the sound of crunching boots perked them up. Three squads of first platoon came marching through the forest carrying third platoon's guidon high. They walked right past fourth platoon as they lay in the foliage.

"We have return victorious," First's PG said thrusting the guidon to the darkening sky. This was meet by cheers from the recruits that had remained in the camp. "This leaves only fourth's." The PG said as he stuck the guidon next to the others. "Any word from the scouts?"

"Nope," A recruit said. "They haven't been able to found those freaks yet."

"Well have they returned yet?" The PG asked as he removed his helmet.

"No," A different recruit reported. "A DI said they were being used for a detail so they won't be back till tonight."

"That's alright," The PG said. "We have three guidons already." This got more cheers as first settled in for the night. Fourth platoon lay in wait as night came bring and with it the darkness. First platoon had retreated to their tents leaving only a two man fireguard awake and alert. Still fourth platoon waited until 0148 after watching them for hours. The two on fireguard sat around the middle of camp were a low fire burned near the guidons. All the recruits of fourth platoon were stiff and tired and Vilan knew he would have to make his move soon.

"Ok the plan is this," Vilan whispered into his mike.

"PG if I may," Zimmerman interrupted via radio.

"Go ahead," Vilan said.

"Let me try something first then you can shoot 'em up if it doesn't work," Zimmerman explained. "If my plan works we won't have to fire a shot."

"What is your plan?" Vilan asked truly curious.

"Just trust me," Zimmerman said.

"All right," Vilan said reluctantly. Getting the go ahead Zimmerman slapped the recruit's shoulder that was next to him which was Private Hook.

"You with me," Zimmerman whispered. Hook nodded as Zimmerman started to crawl towards first's camp Hook right behind him. They silently inched their way along till they were inside the camp and laying next to a tent. "Just follow my lead." Zimmerman said in a whisper that Hook was barely able to hear. Hook nodded and then Zimmerman quietly stood up, rolled his shoulders back and started to walk towards the fireguard. Hook was confused but quickly and quietly stood and followed him. Once Zimmerman was only ten feet from the fireguard he actually spoke to them shocking Hook even more.

"Hey," Zimmerman whispered.

"Huh?" One of the two sleepy recruits said turning to face Zimmerman.

"We're you relief," Zimmerman lied pointing at himself and Hook.

"Oh," The unaware recruit said as he stood and squinted at Zimmerman. Having been staring at a bright fire and now looking into darkness Zimmerman was nothing more than a black man shaped outline. "Ok." The first platoonier then slapped his partner on the shoulder waking him up. The two mumbled something along the lines of thanks and good luck before they slumped off to their tent. Once inside the tent Zimmerman waited for ten full heartbeats before he picked up a guidon handed it to Hook as he picked up the other two. The two then moved as fast as they could silently back into the trees where they started to crawl again just as the real fireguard replacements exited their tent. They walked over to the fire and sat down, they didn't care the shift before them had gone to sleep before they were on duty and in their drowsy state they didn't notice the missing guidons.

"PG we got all three guidons," Zimmerman whispered into his radio. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"Roger let's move out," Vilan ordered. With that the two squads of fourth platoon silently crawled away without first even knowing they were there. With them were the other platoons' guidon they had gotten without firing a shot. Once they reached their camp they hid the guidons like they had the water jugs. Then in each fox hole one man stayed awake for two hours and then was replaced by the other so at all times half the platoon was awake and unlike first's fireguard alert. Dawn came without incident but as day broke they could hear the running of boots and gunshots echoing between the trees and the



other platoons tried to find out who had their guidon and where they were. Several different squads had neared fourth platoon's camp but did not discover it. Vilan had ordered them not to shoot unless necessary. A skirmish even took place between a squad of third and first platoon in front of them and still they didn't notice them.

Then noon came and loud whistles were heard throughout the forest signaling that it was over. Fourth platoon rose like ghost from their fox holes and started to march back towards the COP. They were the last to reach it as the other platoons were already there and shouting at each other for they knew they were lying and someone had their guidons. Then fourth marched out of the trees carrying all four platoon's guidons earning them death stares from the other recruits. None stared more harshly then first platoon. They presented them to First Sergeant Peterson who declared them the winners and then he passed out the guidons to their rightful platoons. All the platoons were then loaded into trucks and driven back to their barracks fourth platoon's sprits extremely high. They felt invincible as if nothing could touch them.

#### 10. Fully blooded

Vilan sat on the cold concrete pad of the CTA resting his back against one of the steel support columns, the quiet night air slightly chilling him, as he twirled the small plastic card in his claws. He watched as the rest of his platoon stood dressed in PTs waiting for one of the five pay phones in the CTA to become available. It seemed that winning the platoon vs platoon combat exercise, the obstacle course and being the highest scoring platoon in BRM had finally earned them a 10 minute phone call home. Their first one, with less than a week till graduation, when every other platoon had at least two by then. Vilan didn't tell the platoon but they should've had two as well since everyone had qualified first time go at BMR but then Decker fucked it up with his M&Ms. Vilan sat and watched the rest of the platoon make their calls, a few with moist eyes after hearing a love one's voice after so long. He himself didn't have anyone to call. There was his mother but when they were relocated by the UNSC he had no idea of her address let alone phone number. So he would sit and watch the others be absolutely happy for 10 minutes as he sat and twirled his phone card.

"Mind if I sit here?" Zimmerman asked pointing at the ground next to Vilan.

"Of course not my friend," Vilan said scooting over so they could both rest their backs on the steel beam. Zimmerman sat down next to Vilan and rested his back against the beam as well.

"I would go get in line," Zimmerman said pointing at the line of recruits standing by the phones.

"There is no reason to," Vilan explained. "I do not know my mother's number."

"So what are you going to do with your phone card?" Zimmerman asked eyeing it greedy and then his face flushed in shame. Vilan saw this and his mandibles twisted into a smile as he placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Truthfully I considered giving it to you," Vilan explained. "However since I am the PG now I can not show favoritism. I considered giving it away at random but someone would get two calls and this would be unfair as well. So I decided to just keep it."

"That's probably for the best," Zimmerman agreed.

"May I ask you a personal question?" Vilan asked.

"After what you have shared with me just because I asked you," Zimmerman said. "I would say you have earned your own question or two." Vilan nodded in agreement.

"Very well," Vilan said. "You appear to be rather intelligent."

"Uhm thanks," Zimmerman said a little unsure.

"What I meant is you are more intelligent then say Decker, Stone and myself," Vilan explained. "Yet you are Infantry I wish to know why?"

"Well one it isn't hard to be smarter than Decker, a door knob is smarter than Decker," Zimmerman explained. "Do you remember our first day here, how DI Willy said all the stupid ones are Infantry and the really stupid ones are the ones that scored high enough on the enlistment exam and then still chose Infantry?"

"I do recall this," Vilan said with a smile. "I also recall you being coated in mud." Zimmerman sighed heavily at the memory.

"We that's me: a really stupid one," Zimmerman explained. "After seeing my exam scores my recruiter was really pushing for me to join the Navy instead. He said I could be an officer if I would attend college courses while in training."

"Like Hook?" Vilan asked.

"Not quite," Zimmerman explained. "Naval officers don't go to basic training like this one. All their training is done at an academy especially for officers. I told him I didn't want to be a Navy officer. He then explained that once I do become a Navy officer though I could become part of the ONI. That was the last thing I wanted to be, a goddamn spook so I looked at the list of jobs. Saw the shortest training job, one that still officered a 10,000 enlistment bonus: Infantry. I then told him I didn't want to be behind a desk I wanted to be on the front line killing shit so I told him I wanted to be a Marine Infantrymen. Boy did that piss him off but it was my choice and I scored high enough to get it."

"So you choose to become an Infantrymen just to upset your recruiter?" Vilan asked.

"Wow your really make me seem like an idiot when you say it like that," Zimmerman said rubbing the back of his head. "But I really did mean what I said how I wanted to kill shit. I mean when it's all said and done what am I going to tell my future kids that I served the war behind a desk writing reports or that I was in the shit getting shot at as well as shooting back. Which sounds more exciting to you?"

"If you fall in battle before you have any offspring?" Vilan asked.

"Goddamn, you're just pissing all in my cheerios," Zimmerman said with a chuckle. "I think you are smarter than me. Which bring me to my question why did you choose Infantry?"

"It was the only thing I was able to become after my enlistment exam," Vilan explained breaking eye contact.

"Oh really?" Zimmerman asked his face flushing a little again. Vilan looked at Zimmerman out of the corner of his eye and thought about telling him the truth. That he was only eight, fully grown by his species standards, but way to young for enlistment for the UNSC. The only reason that he was able to enlist at all was due to Admiral McKnight forging his documents. Vilan opened his mouth to say something when Willy's booming voice echoed through the CTA.

"Alright!" Willy shouted to be heard not angry. "Those of you that have finished your calls get up to the bay and get into your bunks! Those of you that have to finish your calls will stay down here and then once they are done you will immediately get into your bunks and go to sleep! Understood!?"

"YES SIR!" The ones not on the phones shouted.

"Let's go get some sleep buddy," Zimmerman said getting to his feet. "We have a fun day tomorrow, we get to play with mortars."

"Very well," Vilan said getting to his feet as well. The two walked up to the bay and got into their bunks and fell asleep shortly afterwards. The next day the entire company was sitting in the indirect fire range bleachers as the range sergeant gave his brief on mortars.

"So in conclusion you're just going to hang and then fire," The sergeant explained demonstrating on a 40mm mortar and dummy round. "Remember the degrees on the bottom are for direction the ones on the elevation knob are for range. Alright break down in to platoons and head to your stations. Dismissed!" There was only one mortar range firing line and the entire company couldn't stay busy with just that. So there were four stations: one was the mortar firing, another was learning about the different kind of mortar rounds, the third was how to call for mortar support. The last one was on a range opposite of the mortar range here they went over the M41 multipurpose rocket launcher operation and firing, this was where fourth platoon found themselves at first.

"Alright," The corporal giving the lesson said. "Does everyone have one?" He was referring to the practice launchers that worked and did everything like the real thing but fire a rocket. All the recruits nodded yes as they held them in their arms unsure of what to do.

"Ok who here has seen the vids from the last war showing an infantry grunt just shouldering and firing one of these?" He asked patting his own practice launcher. A lot of hands went up. "Well I hate to break to you but there are eight steps you have to perform so you can fire this weapon system. The first thing you're going to do is remove this small pin in the back of the launcher near the exhaust ends of the

tubes. This allows you to pull out the black knob the pin was inside of. When you do you'll expose a red colored section of said knob. If you read the little diagram to the left you'll see that black is unarmed and red is armed. Everyone following me so far?" Everyone nodded yes as they removed the pins and pulled the knobs of their own launchers.

"Outstanding," The corporal said pleased. "Pulling that knob you have just activated the battery pack that powers the optical sight and firing circuit. Now that the sight has power you're going to flip it on. The switch is located on the side of the sight and when you flip it on a red light will glow near the eye piece letting you know it's turned on. If you've been keeping count that's three the fourth step is to verify the sight is working by looking through it and checking for the green icon in the upper right corner of the screen. Once the sight has been checked you have to charge the weapon by moving the firing lever on top of the weapon's tubes to the left, back, forward and to the right again. Everyone still tracking?" More nods as the recruits charged their weapons.

"Outstanding we'll make killers out of you yet," The corporal continued his lesson. "With the weapon charged you look back through the sight and next to the green icon there should be a flashing red word. It will be armed. The sixth step is to depress the trigger on the forward handgrip. After you do, and remain holding it, and then look back through the sight the flashing armed will be solid now. The next thing you do if flip off the trigger safety on the second trigger on the rear handgrip. The eighth and final step is after you line up your target is to pull the second trigger, finally firing your rocket. Now remember you have to keep depressing the front trigger in order to fire the rocket. You can fire the second rocket after you release the rear trigger and depress it again once the tubes have exchanged positions. Now all these arming systems are on the rocket tubes themselves meaning you have to do this every time you reload, all but the safety on the second trigger. Remember if you forget any of these steps they are written on top of the launcher. Any question?" The recruits shook their heads.

"I knew I liked this group," The corporal said with a smile. "If for any reason you decide not to fire your rocket after all that, the first thing you're going to do it release that forward trigger and put the safety back on then push the knob back in to turn the battery off. Now that you know how to arm and fire a rocket you're going to need to know how to aim it. Now these newest models only home in on air craft, to do that you look through the sight and aim at your target till it turns red. You're going to keep tracking your target till you hear a tone and yellow triangles appear in the sight. Once you hear the tone and see that, let your rocket fly and the bastard is going to get a 102mm high explosive shaped charge up his ass. Aiming at ground targets is just like aiming your rifles expect the drop rate for a rocket is roughly one meter for every thousand meters and there is no front and rear sight just the one. Any question?" Here Vilan raised his hand. "Yes you Private...Jones."

"Sir performing all these steps in battle could easily get a marine killed couldn't they?" Vilan asked.

"They easily could," The corporal said with a smile. "That's why, now you are never ever supposed to do this but, most marines before heading out on a mission prepare everything before hand and then push

the knob back in to turn the battery off and then flip the safety back on. So all they need to do is turn the battery back on and flip the safety off. Now all that's left of this lesson is to demonstrate a good firing position. Now you're a fool if you try to fire this standing up, you can but the only position you have to stand in so you aren't knocked on your ass is very uncomfortable. If you insist on doing it though, the first thing you're going to do is stand square to your target. You're going to spread your legs shoulder width apart and then turn your right foot to the side completely while turning your left foot to the left slightly. It's important to keep your shoulder's square to the target. Now bend your knees slightly and really lean into the launcher." The recruits of fourth platoon did this and found it extremely uncomfortable and very awkward like the corporal had said.

"Alright the best position to fire from is from the kneeling position," The corporal said. "It's also the easiest to get into its just like with your rifles expect you're going to lean into it more and you can't sit on your foot. Aim and then let fly, any question?" No one raised their hands. "Alright just one more thing to go over. Just before you fire you're going to look to your left and right as well as behind you to make sure no one is around you. Then you will shout, I say again **\*\*shout\*\***: \_back blast area clear\_ just before you fire. Got it?"

"YES SIR!" Came the shouted reply.

"I like this group," The corporal said. "Everyone find a spot on the range." The rest of the time was spent practicing arming the launcher and then firing a 9mm tracer round from the launchers at tank husks. Shouts of \_back blast area clear\_ were heard up and down the line just before the pop of a tracer being fired. After each recruit had fired several times from both the kneeling and standing position they handed the launchers back to the corporal before they moved onto the next station and class. The platoon pretended to be interested as they learned about the different kinds of mortar rounds: HE, AP, gas, smoke, and illumination. They paid closer attention to using radios to call for fire missions. They found this to be more entertaining and useful knowledge. After that the company broke for a lunch of more MREs then fourth platoon finally made it to the mortar range where they broke off into pairs. When a mortar pit became available a new pair would jump in and receive their ammo from the pit NCO. Vilan and Zimmerman made sure they were together as they jumped in a pit that was headed up by none other than First Sergeant Peterson himself.

"Alright who's up first?" Peterson asked.

"I'll go first sir," Zimmerman said. Peterson handed Zimmerman a box of five 40mm practice mortar rounds. He then gave Vilan a pair of field glasses as he pressed his own up to his eyes and stared down range.

"Alright this is how this is going to work: I'll call out your target," Peterson explained. "The firer will see it and then try to sight it in and hit it themselves. If they miss the spotter will sight them in, for if you were really firing these in the field you wouldn't be able to see your target. Understood?"

"Yes sir!" Vilan and Zimmerman shouted in unison.

"Outstanding," Peterson said. "Your first target is a structure at your 12 o'clock 300 meters down range." Zimmerman and Vilan both peered down range and saw a simple wooden building covered in unpainted plywood. There were orange patches on and all around it. Zimmerman knelt and adjusted the mortar, looked up at the target and then tweaked the mortar a little more. That complete he picked up a round from the box and placed it half way into the tube but still held onto it, half still out of the tube: hanging it. He looked up at Vilan who was staring at the target with the glasses, who found them to be a hindrance so he lowered them and used his naked eyes.

"Fire!" Vilan said. Zimmerman let go of the round allowing it to fall down the tube as he leaned back, ducked his head and covered his ears. Two seconds later the mortar round shot back out of the tube with a loud thump. Vilan tracked it through the sky and watched as it whistled back to the ground hitting behind and to the right of the building a orange clouded of chalk exploding as the practice round hit. "Adjust fire, adjust fire!" Vilan said still not using the field glasses. "Decrease elevation two degrees move one degree to the right." Zimmerman made the adjustment to the mortar and picked up a second round. He then hung the second round in the tube and looked back up and Vilan.

"Ready," Zimmerman said.

"Fire," Vilan ordered. Zimmerman dropped the second round down the tube and ducked his head again. A second later the round was launched from the tube and this time it hit the top of the building covering the roof in orange chalk.

"Confirmed hit," Peterson said casting a sideways glance at Vilan since he had just sighted Zimmerman in without using the field glasses. "Next target a vehicle at you 2 o'clock 575 meters down range." Vilan and Zimmerman both spotted the Warthog husk covered in old and fresh orange chalk. Zimmerman adjusted the mortar again and hung the next round and waited on Vilan. Vilan told him to fire and he dropped the round in, a second later it shot back out and hit to the left and short of the target.

"Adjust fire, adjust fire," Vilan ordered peering at the target still without the field glasses. "Increase elevation seven degrees, adjust four degrees to the right." Zimmerman adjusted and hung his fourth round as he looked up at Vilan. "Fire!" The round hit right on target covering the husk in more chalk.

"Confirmed hit," Peterson said trying to keep the amazement out of his voice as he had just watch someone sight in a target at 575 meters with just their bare eyes. "Next target a structure at your 11 o'clock 1000 meters." This was the max range of the 40 mm mortar. Zimmerman peered at the target for a second longer and made adjustments to the mortar.

"Phst," Vilan whispered out of the side of his mouth causing Zimmerman to look at him before he picked up his last round. "Increase elevation four more degrees and to the left five more degrees." Vilan said in a whisper after he eyed the target long enough. Peterson had heard him but was going to let it slide one because it was Zimmerman's last round and two he was curious to see

how good this Elite was. Zimmerman made the adjustments and hung his fifth and final round.

"Fire," Vilan said. Zimmerman dropped the round in and after it shot back out he looked up to see if it hit. All three of them did the whistling filling the air as it arched towards its target. It hit the middle of the roof of the second plywood building giving it a dusting of orange chalk.

"Confirmed hit," Peterson said truly impressed. "Switch." He ordered as he handed Vilan a box of five shells after he handed Zimmerman the field glasses. Zimmerman never got a chance to sight him in however as after Peterson called out the target Vilan would look at it for a second and then adjust the mortar. He would then hit it on his first attempt even the targets at a 1000 meters. Peterson even cheated and gave him a target at 1100 meters which was outside of the mortar's range. Vilan just nodded, aimed and waited for just a second longer as a light breeze blew down range before he fired and still hit it.

"Goddamn," Peterson said truly impressed as Vilan stood back up. "You would have made an outstanding mortar-men Private Jones."

"Thank you sir," Vilan said. The two joined the rest of the platoon at the bleachers as a new pair took their place in the pit they had just freed up. Once fourth platoon had finished with the mortars the company loaded back onto the buses and were taken back to the barracks. This was a huge moment for Charlie Company since that was a range they were making up. That was the last thing they had to complete now they were just biding their time till graduation, which was only in a few more days. The platoons were sent back to their bays where they started to clean their TA-50 gear to turn back in. All but Vilan since he was keeping his for it was custom made just for him. He settled for cleaning his rifle which they would also be turning in soon as well. Zimmerman and Vilan found themselves sitting on the floor next to each other backs against a wall locker. Vilan used a brushed tipped rod to swap the inside of his rifle's barrel as Zimmerman used a bush and water to scrub the dirt off his chest plate. Zimmerman took a deep breath in just before he spoke.

"It been nice knowing you buddy," Zimmerman said turning to look at Vilan. "I just want you to know you're the first real friend I've had in a long, long time. Hopeful our paths will cross again."

"What do you speak of?" Vilan demanded looked Zimmerman in the eyes.

"Well," Zimmerman said clearing his throat his eyes stinging a little bit as he thought about what he was about to tell Vilan. "As you know were getting down to it. We'll soon be leaving this hell hole, all the non-infantry recruits will head off to finish their training. While us infantry grunts will get our orders cut and sent off to an infantry company."

"And?" Vilan demanded seeming a little hurt.

"Well they're not just going to put a whole bunch of raw recruits into the same company," Zimmerman explained finding it harder and harder to look Vilan in the eye. "The same battalion maybe and maybe a few in the same company but defiantly not in the same platoon. So

after gradation we'll probably not see each other again unless we are deployed together."

"Oh," Vilan said dropping his gaze to the floor as his voice took on a sad tone. "Then I hope we meet victorious on the field of battle."

"Agreed," Zimmerman said with a smile. Vilan looked back up and the two locked eyes for a long while before they turned their attention back to what they were cleaning. They stayed in silence as each didn't know what to say to the other. They had been through so much in the past 11 weeks and had become like brothers, to suddenly realize they might never see each other again was unthinkable.

"Alright privates gather around!" Willy shouted as he entered the bay interrupting the two's awkward silence. They platoon quickly formed a semicircle around the DI holding a stack of papers in his hand. Willy shoved them up to his nose and inhaled deep through it. "Ah smell those fresh cut orders." This got mummings of excitement from the infantry recruits. "That's right I hold in my hand your tickets out of the this shit hole." He then held them up to his face so he could read them. "Private Stone!"

"Here sir!" Stone shouted. "Moving sir!" Stone ran up and stood in front of Willy.

"343rd Infantry Battalion," Willy announced as he handed the sheet over to Stone who seized it quickly and read it to make sure he wasn't lying. Stone quickly walked away.

"Private Thompson!" Willy shouted reading the next name.

"Here sir! Moving sir!" He shouted running to stand in front of Willy.

"343rd Infantry Battalion," Willy said handing him his orders. That's how it went each infantrymen getting assigned a battalion most going to 343rd some going to the 546th then he got to Vilan.

"Private Jones!" Willy called out reading for one of the few remaining papers.

"Here sir! Moving sir!" Vilan said running and standing in front of Willy the DI forced to look up at him.

"73rd Ranger Regiment," Willy announced a bit of pride entering his voice. This got more mummings from the platoon they had all heard about the marine rangers it was the closest thing a marine could get to spec ops without becoming a ODST. It was even debated that the rangers were better, but these kind of debates raged in every branch. Vilan accepted his orders knowing there was something different about them but not knowing what. Willy read off a few more names and then he got to the last sheet.

"Private Zimmerman!" Willy shouted reading the last name.

"Here sir! Moving sir!" Zimmerman ran up to Willy casting a sad glance over at Vilan, who had been encircled by most of the platoon to congratulate him.



"You two have become close?" Willy asked in a low voice.

"Yes sir," Zimmerman admitted. "He's the brother I never had."

"I hope you're right because your brotherly bond will defiantly be tested," Willy said just before he shouted. "73rd Ranger Regiment!" He handed the orders to Zimmerman who looked at them mouth agape. "Make sure to watch each other's backs, you're going to be in the same squad I saw to it." Willy said in a low voice again.

"Thank you sir," Zimmerman stammered.

"DON'T THANK ME THANK YOUR WHORE ASS MOTHER AND YOUR RECRUITER!" Zimmerman quickly backed away and was also encircled by the platoon as he tried to fight his way over to Vilan. The two found themselves standing in front of each other with the rest of the platoon circled around them. They stood looking at each other clutching their orders Vilan was the one that spoke first.

"At least we are in the same regiment," Vilan said.

"We're in the same squad," Zimmerman said unable to hide his happiness. "DI Willy just told me." The two just looked at each other for a second more, it was Vilan who made the first move again. He took a step closer and picked Zimmerman up into an embrace, Zimmerman was actually lifted off the ground. A moment later Vilan set him back down and the platoon clapped and patted them on the back two of them had just become rangers!

"Alright!" Will shouted causing their attention to snap back to him. "All those of you leaving will get a week of leave to spend however you like. All those but the two new rangers you will report immediately to your next duty station, the rest immediately after graduation day will go to your secondary training site." With that Willy left the bay leaving the platoon to congratulate Zimmerman and Vilan again. Later that night the platoon slept soundly in their bunks, none more so then Vilan and Zimmerman. That was until Bunny walked into the bay snapping his fingers in a slow steady rhythm. The recruits on fireguard quickly go to their feet.

"Wake the platoon," Bunny ordered in a whisper. The two recruits hurried to wake the platoon up. Once they were all up and standing toe to line Bunny spoke addressing them all. "Get dressed in your uniforms and be formed up in the CTA in 10 minutes." He ordered just before he walked out of the bay. Vilan looked at his watch, it was 1:30 in the morning, before he snapped to and hurried to get dressed. Eight minutes later the entire fourth platoon was formed up in the CTA dressed in uniform shivering in the chilled night air. Bunny then marched them into the woods directly across from the barracks, the recruits could see a glowing in the distance. As they got closer they could tell it was bonfire in the middle of a clearing. Bunny marched them into the clearing and had them face the fire the pleasant heat warming their numb skin and cold bones. There were two other masked men there as well their faces hidden by balaclavas, both had the uniform of a UNSC marine and rank of staff sergeant.

"Good evening marines," Bunny said still whispering as he always did. This caused the platoon to perk up because he hadn't called them assholes, dumbasses, limp dicks or even privates he had called them

marines. "That's right you have reached the point in your training that you are no longer civilians but marines the best the UNSC has to offer. You are now part of the largest brotherhood in the universe the UNSC Marine Corps and I am proud to call each and every one of you marines. Most of you will see combat and some of you will die, thus is the way of a marine, but you will not be forgotten. There is no such thing as a former marine living or dead and you will always be remembered by your brothers." Here Bunny paused as he moved along the formation.

"Some of you will be tested by combat very soon," Bunny explained. "Most of you will never see each other again so hang on to your memories the good and the bad for they may be all you have left of them. We have a tradition in this platoon: baptism of blood." Here one of the masked men handed Bunny a small bowl. "As long as there has been a marine corps we have shed our blood for others but we have also forced the enemy to shed his blood as well and it is in that blood we shall anoint you in tonight." Bunny then walked up to the first rank, stood in front of the first marine (Private Hook), dipped his thumb in the bowl and pulled it back up a blue paste on it. He then drew blue lines on each of Hook's cheeks and then two more on his chin giving his face a war painted look. Bunny then moved to the next marine in line as the other masked men did the same to the second and third ranks. The marines of fourth platoon chests swelled with pride as each one was marked with the blue blood. Once every marine had been marked, Vilan had lines drawn along his mandibles and forehead instead, Bunny returned to the front of the formation.

"Remember your brothers and they will remember you," Bunny said somberly. "Fall out head back to the bay." The platoon fell out and headed back to the bay their faces covered in blue 'blood' and their steps light. For they had done something that most had thought impossible after their first night with Drill Instructor Willy that had become marines.

## 11. Graduation

**\*\*12 weeks after Charlie Company got off the buses.\*\***

The marines of forth platoon marched in prefect step using the sound of the base drum to keep time as the band played the upbeat music. They swung their arm carefully and in prefect sync as they marched swinging them six inches to the front and nine inches to the rear. Their dress uniforms were freshly pressed and fitted perfectly to each marine even the tall and lengthy Vilan. Their highly polished and shinny dress shoes crunched on the highly manicured grass of the pride field. The only thing Vilan couldn't wear was the white dress gloves. Since he was the tallest Vilan was in the front all the way to the right. They followed right behind third platoon as they march passed the bleachers that Lieutenant Colonel Jackson, Sergeant Major Wells and Captain Ford also in full dress uniform stood in front of. Just before they passed the two 'unicorns' DI Willy, also in dress uniform, gave his first command since he had started marching the formation.

"Eyes! Right!" Willy shouted. Here every marine turned their head to the right expect the ones in the far right rank as Willy saluted. As they did the marines could see into the bleachers and the various

civilians that sat there cheering. Zimmerman who had gotten to look to the right scanned the crowd looking for his friends but couldn't find them in the sea of cheering and screaming faces. "Ready! Front!" The marines snapped their heads back forward as they marched pass Jackson and Wells. Once they had made it pass them Willy had them make a column left and marched them off the field as the lengthy graduation ceremony finally concluded. Once they were out of sight of the bleachers Willy stopped them and had them turn to face him.

"Alright," Willy said addressing the platoon as a whole. "Today is the day you have all been dreaming of: graduation and family day. However you're not in the clear just yet. You fuck up while you're on pass and your ass will go back to a day one restart. Remember absolutely no drinking what so ever, along with no tobacco use...any kind or form. You are to be back at the barracks no later than 1800 or there will be hell to pay. Understand?"

"Yes sir!" The new marines shouted.

"Now with that being said have fun today but be responsible. Remember if you don't have any family here you cannot leave the base unless you buddy up with someone," Willy said and then he did something fourth platoon had never seen before, he smiled. "Marines you are hereby released from this point forward till 1800 hours. Dismissed!" The marines took a step back and slowly started to move out of formation heading towards the bleachers where their friends and love ones waited. "Run privates they're waiting." They didn't wait one more second as all broke into a run joining the other marines of the rest of the platoons. As their love ones left the bleachers and ran towards them meeting each out most immediately moving to embraces. All expect Vilan who walked at a slow pace not heading towards the bleachers but instead to the edge of the pride field. He stood and took in a deep breath as he looked the field over, he had done it he had become a marine like his father before him.

"Father," Vilan said softly. "If only you could see what I have become. If I only knew you would be proud of me."

"He would indeed be young one," A soft familiar voice said in Sangheili. Vilan whipped around and look up into the eyes of his tall slender mother dressed in a form fitting human dress. Being fully Sangheili she was a head taller than he was even though she was a female. He only hesitated for half a second before he embraced her and she wasted no time hugging him back. Vilan felt tears start to form in his eyes after feeling his mother's embrace having gone so long without it. He managed to keep his tears in check, his mother however was not and he could feel her warm tears land on his mandibles and neck. She finally let go of him and he was allowed to take a step back. "I am so proud of you young one and I know your father would be as well."

"I hope so mother," Vilan said as he looked into her soft kind eyes. "I wish he was able to see that I have become a marine like him. I also wish to become just as noble a warrior as he was."

"You will be my son," She said placing her hands on his shoulders.

"Congratulations Private Jones on becoming a ranger," Another

familiar voice said in English as a second figure step from behind Vilan tall mother. Vilan recognized the man and quickly came smartly to attention and saluted.

"Admiral McKnight an honor to see you sir," Vilan said addressing him how he had been trained.

"Easy son," McKnight said as he quickly returned the salute. "You don't have to do that when I'm in civilian clothes. There is a reason as well, I outrank the post commander and if I came in uniform they would have to hold a rather pointless ceremony. So let's keep the fact that I'm an admiral low key."

"Sir yes sir," Vilan said still at attention.

"At easy son," McKnight said with a chuckle. Vilan spread his legs shoulder width apart and placed his hands behind his back. "I thought you would want this back." McKnight handed Vilan his father's combat knife that he had given to Vilan the night before he was killed. Vilan had given it to McKnight for safe keeping after he was informed that if the DIs found it, it would be taken from him. Vilan accepted the knife and removed the blade from its sheath very carefully. Asides from the watch he wore on his wrist(that was also formally his father's) the knife was all he had left to remember his father by. Vilan re-sheathed the knife and tucked it in to his belt line under his dress jacket.

"Thank you sir," Vilan said.

"You still got to be careful," McKnight explained. "If a DI finds that they'll still take it from you even though this will be your last night here."

"Or course sir," Vilan said and then turn towards his mother. "When are we leaving?" His mother's face changed from joy to sadness.

"I am afraid I cannot leave this installation," She said her voice heavy.

"What? Why?" Vilan demanded from first her and then turned towards McKnight.

"You see," McKnight said a little awkwardness creeping into his voice. "Your mother was relocated to on post housing on this very post."

"It is a splendid home," His mother chimed in.

"However they are still getting her paper work together so she can leave and return at her leaser," McKnight explained.

"The post has ever thing I need," His mother chimed in again. "The PX has a bounty of food."

"Why is she not able to leave sir?" Vilan demanded a little harsher then he meant to. "We are both citizens are we not? It has been months what is taking so long sir?"

"Look I'm sorry," McKnight said. "Really I am but the ones that make those decisions are above me."

"My apologies sir," Vilan said. "I lost control of my emotions."

"It's alright son," McKnight said. "I don't agree with it either." Vilan looked at his mother and his angry quickly passed as she smiled at him again.

"Don't worry mother we can stay on post," Vilan said in his native tongue. "I myself have only seen the barracks and ranges and would like to see more." His mother had raised him and knew when he was lying, he was doing so right now. She was about to say something when a new voice interrupted her.

"Hey Jones," Zimmerman called out at he walked towards him. "My jackass friends are a no show. You going into town?" He then saw McKnight not knowing he was an admiral. "Hello sir." He then saw Vilan's mother and his cheeks flushed having sworn in front of such a beautiful creature. "Sorry about my language ma'am." Zimmerman said bowing his head for fear he would only stare at her breasts.

"Who is this handsome warrior," She asked Vilan. Vilan moved to stand next to Zimmerman and placed an arm around his shoulders causing him to look up. Zimmerman did glance at the female Sangheili's breasts but he managed to bring his eyes up to her face quickly, not before his blush deepened.

"This is Zimmerman," Vilan explained his arm still around him. "My bunkmate, friend and fellow warrior in the upcoming battles. Zimmerman this is my mother."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," She said reaching out and caressed his face. "Thank you for watching over my son and please help keep him safe in battle."

"It was no problem ma'am," Zimmerman said tingling at the strange but still feminine touch. "But I think it will be your son that will be protecting me. I thought I was barely going to squeak by to become an infantry grunt I never thought I would become a ranger. We all knew Jones would though."

"You have become a ranger as well?" McKnight asked. "Congratulations son."

"Thank you sir," Zimmerman said still not knowing his name or rank.

"Zimmerman this is adm-" Vilan started but was interrupted by McKnight.

"Just a friend of Jones's father," McKnight said extending his hand. Zimmerman shook it quickly.

"Nice to meet you sir," Zimmerman said.

"Your friends didn't show?" Vilan asked.

"Yeah the bastards...or uhm sorry again ma'am," Zimmerman explained flushing again. "They were unable to get leave from their current duty stations."

"Did your family manage to make it?" Was Vilan's next question.

"I'm afraid not," Zimmerman explained. "I knew this however since they told me in a letter. They wouldn't be able to pull themselves away from work during their busy season."

"So you are not able to leave post?" Vilan asked finally understanding.

"Exactly," Zimmerman said and then rubbing the back of his neck. "I was wondering if I could go with you and your mother?"

"Of course," Vilan said glancing at his mother. "But we are not going to leave post for mother cannot leave yet."

"Oh," Zimmerman said a little disappointment creeping into his voice. "Do you mind if I go with you?" Vilan was about to say: of course once again but his mother spoke first.

"Young one go with your friend," She said softly.

"What will you do?" Vilan asked.

"I will stay here," She explained Vilan opened his mouth to say something. "Do not worry young one I will be fine, you forget this is the age you would be leaving home for training as it is."

"Are you sure?" Vilan asked.

"Yes young one go have a wonderful time," She said. Vilan ran up and embraced her one last time before he turned to Zimmerman.

"Let's go buddy," Zimmerman said cheerful. Vilan followed Zimmerman towards the cab stand to catch a ride to town. His mother couldn't help but notice how her son had become cheerful once again.

"You know this will probably be the last time you see him for a long while," McKnight explained moving to stand next to her. "He leaves for his unit tomorrow since it's a ranger unit they're already off to the front lines."

"I am aware of this," His mother explained tears of joy mixed with tears of sorrow trickled from her eyes. "But battle is a part of any warrior's life even more so for a Sangheili."

"You think his father would be proud of him?" McKnight asked but didn't really know why.

"He would be very proud," She said this with a heavy sigh. "He however would not like his chosen path. The way my husband spoke of his battles, he seemed more ashamed of his actions then proud, the exact opposite how most male Sangheilis feel. The things he would shout in his sleep when he had his nightmares were awful and I knew he was in pain and this pained me. I know he would not want his son to experience that."

"I would have to agree," McKnight said. "I could see if I could get him transferred to a rear unit."

"He would dislike that a lot," She said with a small chuckle. "It's in his nature to be in the heart of the battle."

"And it was his father's luck to be trusted into the heart of battle," McKnight said with a chuckle of his own. "With his nature and the luck of his father he should have many a stories to tell when it's all said and done."

"I agree," She said with one last tear making its way down her face.

"How is Mrs. Hamanee doing?" McKnight asked referring to the wife of Jones's father's former field marshal.

"She is doing much better now," Jones's mother said. "She is even contemplating about living on her own."

"That's good," McKnight remarked. "Why was she unable to make to his graduation?"

"She would never admit it," She explained. "But seeing him pains her and it is understandable. She lost her husband, son and former lover that awful day."

"That would be more than most could bear," McKnight said agreed.

Zimmerman and Vilan rode in the back of the taxi the driving glancing in the mirror to look at Vilan every once in awhile.

"So where to boys," The cabby asked.

"Where can a fella that hasn't had real food in 12 weeks go to get a decent meal?" Zimmerman asked. The cabby chuckled.

"I know this great little diner," The cabby started. "The owner is real friendly with marines, great homemade food and its out of the way. You won't see too many other marines and I can almost guarantee no DIs." The cabby said the last line with a knowing half smile.

"Sir I think you have just described paradise," Zimmerman said. "Take us there please."

"You've got it chief," The cabby said with another smile. He then glanced in his rearview mirror at Vilan again. "So stretch what's your story?"

"Are you speaking to me?" Vilan asked unfamiliar with the nickname.

"Yeah," The cabby said in a light tone. "It's none of my business and I don't mean to offend, but shouldn't you be fighting for the other side?"

"It is a rather long tail sir," Vilan said. "One that is extremely sorrowful."

"That's aright buddy," The cabby said feeling a little like a jackass. "You don't got to tell it."

"What matters is that he is on the right side," Zimmerman chimed in place an arm around Vilan's shoulders.

"You can say that again," The cabby said with an awkward chuckle. The rest of the ride was in silence. The cab pulled into a parking lot in front of a small building lined with large windows in the front. There were only a few vehicles in the parking lot allowing the cab to pull right up to the front. "Here we are." Zimmerman and Vilan got, Zimmerman paid the driving giving him a nice tip for taking them to a prefect sounding place, they walked into the small diner. It was set up like a typical small dinner a counter in the middle with the dishes and machines to dispense drinks behind it. A window that connected the kitchen to the front was set into the wall behind the counter. There were stools to sit right at the counter with booths in a large U centered around the counter against the many windows. It was 10 in the morning the time right between breakfast and lunch leaving the place mostly empty expect for a few regulars that sipped coffee and picked at plates of food. Most didn't even look up but the few that did stared at Vilan for a while before returning to their drinks or food. The two marines hadn't eaten breakfast or lunch and walked up at sat at the counter. A older woman, standing behind the counter, looking to be in her mid 50s walked up and stood in front of the two placing her hands on the counter.

"How are you doing boys?" She asked her voice soft and kind smelling of mint. "Just graduate?"

"Yes ma'am," Zimmerman said speaking for them both.

"Congratulations. Well can I get you something to drink?" She asked with a polite smile. The two marines stared at her for they had never been given a choice for 12 weeks and were unsure of what to choose. The lady smiled again she had dealt with fresh out of basic marines many a time. "How about some orange juice, sound good?"

"That would be great ma'am," Zimmerman said. She nodded and turned around to get them there drinks. As Zimmerman pulled two menus from a nearby napkin holder and handed one to Vilan. Both opened them and started to read them Zimmerman spotted what he wanted right away. Vilan on the other hand was unfamiliar with most of the dishes and had to read what came with them to see if he even knew those. The lady came back and placed a large glass filled with a bright yellow liquid in front of each.

"Have we decided boys?" She asked pulling a notepad from her front apron pocket.

"I'll have a cheeseburger with fires and a chocolate milkshake," Zimmerman said closing his menu. "The biggest one you got." Smiling she wrote down Zimmerman's order.

"How about you?" She asked facing Vilan as he still stared at his menu. He closed it and careful set it back down on the counter.

"My apologies ma'am but I am unfamiliar with most of these cuisines," Vilan said speaking for the first time since they had walked in. "Which one would you suggest?" She smiled her kind smile as he looked him over.



"You seem like you would have a rather large appetite," She said. "I would suggest the corps breakfast comes with eggs, bacon, ham, sausage, hash browns, pancakes, toast and a biscuit. It was created epically for a hungry marine."

"That sounds prefect ma'am," Vilan said knowing most of the things she listed off having eaten them in basic. He also hoped they would taste a lot better than the ones he had eaten before.

"Coming right up boys," She said placing the piece of paper their order was on, on the counter to the kitchen. A large hand reached out and picked it up before it disappeared back into the kitchen. "If you need anything just give me a shout."

"Will do ma'am," Zimmerman said as she walked away. "Here's to us becoming marines." Zimmerman raised his glass of juice as Vilan did his and the two touched them together before they each took a drink. Having drank nothing but water and very watered down sport drinks the natural sugar in the juice was almost too sweet.

"That is the most remarkable thing I have ever tasted," Vilan said having almost finished his glass in on go.

"You said it," Zimmerman said as he did finish his glass in one drink. "So are you ready for combat?"

"I have been ready for combat the day they attacked my home," Vilan said his expression becoming a little dark.

"I see," Zimmerman said. "Don't worry you'll kill 'em all."

"Agreed," Vilan said as he finished in own glass. The waitress returned bring two fresh glasses with her and taking the empty ones away from Vilan and Zimmerman. As she did she saw the crossed rifles that were pinned to their jacket collars signifying them as infantry.

"You boys get your orders cut yet?" She asked with an air of knowing.

"Yes ma'am," Vilan said.

"What unit you boys get," She asked. "I hope it was the same one." She could tell the two had bounded through basic.

"We did get the same one," Zimmerman said with a smile. "We're both going to the 73rd Ranger Regiment." Here a knowing smile came to her lips.

"Well congratulations again," She said. "My name is Linda, this is my place and I have to say it is a real honor to sever a couple of rangers."

"Please ma'am," Zimmerman said blushing a little. "We haven't seen any combat yet."

"Don't worry you will," Linda said with a chuckle. "My husband was a ranger in the last war so I know all about the rangers." As if on cue

two plates of food and one milkshake appeared on the window's counter. The large hand reached out and slapped a small bell a sharp ringing echoed through the diner. Linda walked over, picked them up and placed them in front of Zimmerman and Vilan. Zimmerman looked at his cheeseburger it was greasy and smelled absolutely wonderful. Vilan took a second to look over his own food his plate loaded down with it and all looked so perfect. The two friends looked at each other just before they tore into their food eating at the high rate of speed they had been trained. They were so focused on the food that they didn't hear the door open or notice the three men that walked in. Linda did however and walked over carrying a pot of coffee over as the three sat in their usual booth.

"The usual boys?" She asked as she filled their cups.

"Do we ever get anything else?" One of them asked.

"No," She said with a smile. "They yours?" She asked nudging her head towards Vilan and Zimmerman as they devoured their food.

"That depends, have they done anything wrong?" A different one asked.

"No," Linda said. "They have been as polite as they could be."

"Then yes they're ours," The one that had asked the question said. "That's Private Jones and Zimmerman, they're going to be rangers."

"I know," Linda said with a smile as she walked away. "Bunny wasn't too mean to them was he?"

"You know me," Gunnery Sergeant Willy said as he sipped his coffee.

"Yeah I do," She said just before she was back behind the counter. "That's why I'm sure they have been scared mentally forever." This caused both George and Espenhover to laugh loudly, George had to spit some coffee back into his cup. Once back behind the counter she stood in front of Vilan and Zimmerman again as they still shoveled food in. "Enjoying the food boys?"

"Oh yes ma'am," Zimmerman said speaking with an overfull mouth bits of food falling from it.

"How about you?" Linda asked Vilan as he shoved a spoonful of eggs into his mouth followed closely by a piece of toast. He looked up and nodded for if he spook a lot more food would have fallen from his mouth. Nodding she walked away and gave the three DI's order to her husband to prepare. She left them alone to finish in peace and since her husband was cooking the DI's meals it left her with nothing to do for a few minutes. Soon the two rangers had finished their food and wiped their mouths. Linda returned and took the plates from the two of them. Zimmerman had a massive brain freeze after downing his milkshake so quickly.

"So how was everything boys?" Linda asked.

"That was some of the best food I've ever had," Zimmerman said wiping his mouth.

"Can I get you two anything else?" She asked.

"No thank you ma'am," Zimmerman said taking out his wallet. "What do I own you?"

"Nothing," She said as she placed the empty plates back on the kitchen window's counter. "Ranger's money is no good here."

"Ma'am please," Zimmerman said flushing again. "You must see hundreds of marines through here with the base nearby. We haven't done anything remarkable please let us pay."

"Agreed," Vilan said. "We have not done anything sufficient to deserve such a reward."

"I see plenty of marines," Linda said with her kind smile. "Though not as many as you'd think. What I don't see a lot of is rangers, your meals on the house."

"Thank you very much ma'am," Zimmerman said not sure what to say. The sharp ringing echoed through the diner again as her husband slapped the bell again letting her know the DIs' food was done.

"Excuse me a moment," Linda said picking up the three plates of food and running it out to the three DIs.

"I'm a ranger to do I get a free meal as well?" Espenhover playfully mocked.

"You of all people should know what those boys are about to go through," Linda said looking at Espenhover but speaking at Willy. "No leave and off to the front right out of basic placed into a ranger unit the culture shocker going from basic to a ranger unit alone might kill them."

"I know," Willy said in a monotone. "Believe me I know."

"Yeah I know," Espenhover said. "Can't blame a guy for trying." The three chuckled as she walked away again. She stood in front of Zimmerman and Vilan again.

"Anything else I can do for you?" She asked.

"You have already done plenty for us," Vilan said. Zimmerman looked at the clock on the wall it said 11 they had only been in there for an hour.

"What is there to do around here?" Zimmerman asked.

"Well if you don't mind walking a bit," Linda started smiling as the expressions on their faces said a walk was the easy part. "There is a movie theater a little over a block from here."

"That would be great ma'am," Zimmerman said standing up.

"Hey could we get some more coffee?" George asked walking up to the counter. "How's it going privates?" Vilan and Zimmerman looked over stunned to not only see a DI in a place they were promised to be DI free but their DI. They were about to snap to pride rest. "Easy

marines just take a seat." Vilan and Zimmerman both sat back down.

"Be nice," Linda ordered as she walked over to the DIs' table carrying a coffee pot. This time the two rangers watched her and saw the other two DIs. Both turned to face George again very afraid now.

"Relax privates," George said talking at seat at the counter then. "I just really wanted to say good job and all that. Also since there is no other privates around, and I like you two, is there anything you wish to asked me?"

"What is your job sir?" Zimmerman asked. "I mean beside from being a drill instructor sir."

"Me? I was, am a Infantry grunt," George explained then before Zimmerman could ask. "DI Espenhover is a tanker, he's part of a Scorpion crew I think he was the driver. DI Willy was a combat medic."

"Was sir?" Vilan asked a little confused. George looked over his shoulder to ensure Willy was still busy with Linda and then lowered his voice.

"Willy was high speed just like you two," George explained speaking just above a whisper. "He didn't really want to kill though, said he wanted to help his fellow man instead so he became a medic. However he was made a ranger on completion of basic training and sent to a ranger unit. Needless to say he did plenty of killing and helping his fellow man. He became so good at it they placed in a spec. ops. unit where he really saw some crazy shit. He still hasn't told me or DI Espenhover the things he did while in it." He glanced over at Willy again and lowered his voice even more. "That's why he's a little...different."

"Sir what's the deal with Bunny?" Zimmerman asked also in a whisper.

"If I told you he'd not only kill you two be me as well," George explained. "I can say this it has something to do with his times in special forces."

"Sir when we shot Bunny with stun rounds that day Decker went AWOL," Vilan started. "How was he able to make it back to barrack before us? I mean the stun rounds should have kept him down for longer than that."

"Ah yes," George said with a smile. "If one takes a muscle relaxant before a combat excuse and get's shot the muscle relaxant shorts the effects." Both Vilan and Zimmerman exchanged a glance that said: cheaters. "Alright privates you enjoy the rest of your leave." George said getting up and walking back to his table. Zimmerman waved and said an final thank you to Linda before they walked out. They walked to the movie theater watched two movies, ate dinner at a nearby restaurant the food still better then what they had in basic but not as good as Linda's. They caught a cab and returned to the base and the barracks by 1730. Vilan said one last goodbye to his mother and got her address so he could write to her. Vilan and Zimmerman were back in the barracks by 1745 and in their bunks by 1755 for unlike

everyone else they had an earlier day tomorrow.

At 0300 the fireguard woke Zimmerman and Vilan both as the rest of the platoon slept. They got up quickly, both showered, Zimmerman shaved, and both got dressed into uniforms they hadn't worn since they were in basic. Zimmerman picked up his over filled duffle bag as Vilan picked up his two, one contained his TA50 gear and at 0315 they walked out of the bay and into the CTA. DI Willy was there to greet them and point them onto a bus. They were the only two passengers, and the ride was in silence until they reached a landing pad where a Pelican waited. As they walked down the stairs Willy spoke.

"Good luck," Was all he said.

"Thank you sir," They both said together. They boarded the Pelican for which they were also the only passengers that took them to a transport shuttle already in orbit. They stowed their gear into lockers and undressed to prepare for cryo sleep. Once the only two passenger were in cryo sleep the small crew made the jump to slipstream space and plotted the course that would take them to the UNSC Frigate \_Honor In All\_.

## 12. Meet 'n' greet

A sergeant moved through the corridors of the Frigate \_Honor In All\_ at a determined march. He was a newly promoted sergeant, it was obvious since the rank on his sleeve was cleaner and nicer than the rest of his uniform. Tucked under his right arm was two personal files for his two new marines. He had only been pinned a few days ago and he was already getting the reasonability. He stopped just outside of a launch bay and looked at his watch, they should be here pretty damn soon. He opened one of the files and glance at it reading it very quickly. There was a muted alarm and a flashing strobe light indicating that the outer doors were opening. He closed the file and stood straighter as he moved his hands behind his back. He quickly moved them back in front since he remember he was a NCO now just as the alarm and strobe stopped. After they did he waited a few more minutes and then the inner doors opened and two new recruits walked out holding full duffel bags. One was a human, like every other marine, the other was an Elite(well half Elite). The sergeant took a deep breath in.

"Privates Jones and Zimmerman over here," The sergeant said waving them over. The two recruits spotted him and jogged over to him stopping just in front of him and came to attention.

"Sir Private Zimmerman!" Zimmerman shouted.

"And Private Jones!" Vilan also shouted.

"Reporting as ordered sir!" The both shouted in unison. The sergeant blinked as the hearing slowly returned to his ears.

"First things first. I'm Sergeant Stevens," Stevens said.

"A pleasure to meet you sir!" Zimmerman said still shouting causing Stevens to blink again.

"Second thing," Stevens said. "I love that you're all high speed and

disciplined but you're not basic anymore and I'm just a sergeant. You can call me sergeant, Stevens, hell I've been known to respond to 'hey asshole'. Expect don't use that last one unless you're just with me or the rest of the squad." They were about to shout again when Stevens held up a hand. "And stop shouting you can relax a little bit."

"Understood sergeant," They said still in unison.

"Outstanding," Stevens said turning around. "Please follow me." Stevens started walking with Vilan and Zimmerman in toe. "Welcome to the UNSC Frigate Honor In All and the 73rd Ranger Regiment, 4th Brigade, 16th Battalion, B Company. I am your sponsor reasonable for getting you intergraded in to the unit. Any questions so far?"

"I have one sergeant," Vilan said. "What are the rangers?"

"Glad you asked," Stevens said. "The rangers are an elite unit that is made up of some of the best marines from all over the UNSC with one simple mission: find the enemy and kill him."

"Excuse me sergeant," Zimmerman chimed in. "Isn't that also the job of regular infantry?"

"Yes," Stevens said with a chuckle. "But they'll just let anyone be an infantry grunt you are selected for the rangers. But the major difference is that a typical infantry battalion has an entire battalion of non-infantry in support of them. In the rangers not very many of us are just infantry most have other jobs to make us a completely self sufficient, quick deployable unit."

"Sergeant," Vilan started a little unsure. "Myself and Private Zimmerman are just infantry."

"I know Private Jones," Stevens said with a smile they couldn't see. "But the one nice thing about an infantry grunt is that they can learn. You Private Jones have the most impressive scores with a mortar I have ever seen. So I'm making you the assistant heavy gunner and squad mortar men."

"Thank you sergeant," Vilan said.

"As for you Private Zimmerman," Stevens said opening his file again. "I think you will make an outstanding R.O." He lead them to a locker room and to two empty open lockers. "Store you gear in here, don't worry about organizing it for the time being." Zimmerman shoved his duffle bag into his locker as Vilan fought with his two duffle bags. But he managed to finally shove them both in there and get the door shut just as Zimmerman shut and locked his. "The codes for the lockers will be your service numbers until you change them. This way." They followed Stevens back out into the corridor and through the ship passing other marines and navy personal. They stopped just outside of a bunkroom. "There is a lot of work we have to get done today but I wanted to introduce you to the rest of the squad." With that he walked into the bunkroom and Vilan and Zimmerman had no choice but to follow him.

The bunkroom was set up similar to their bay from basic. It was essentially a long double wide corridor that bunk beds lined on either side. Instead of wall lockers there were footlockers at the

foot of the bunks sitting back to back. In the middle of the pathway formed by the bunks a group of marines had set up a makeshift table by standing four footlockers on end and placing a board on top. They sat around it sitting on more footlockers turned on end. They were playing poker even though gambling wasn't allowed and using live ammunition as chips, something they were not supposed to have unless on a mission. Stevens had walked right up to the table and stood waiting for Vilan and Zimmerman as they slowly made their way over to them a little unsure.

"How's it going Jack," One of the marines asked. He had a deck of cards in front of him along with his hands clearly the dealer.

"Just wanted you to meet the F.N.G.s," Stevens said. "FNGs this is Hotshot." Stevens pointed at the dealer. He was a well built man with broad shoulders and large biceps that his rolled up sleeves tightly clung to. He also had longer then regulation blond hair that he cheated by shaving around his ears for the reg stated: \_must not give off a unkempt appearance and must not touch the ears. \_"Hotshot is our squad's sniper and DM."

"That's designated marksman not dungeon master," Hotshot said with a chuckle. "Just in case you two are big time nerds." This got chuckles from the rest of the rangers sitting around the table. Zimmerman who may have played a few games of the one Hotshot had just made fun of laughed along with them. Vilan pictured the dungeon master as the person in charge of the pensioner of wars' well being and extracting information from them and laughed along with them as well.

"Hotshot here is also our resident lady killer," Stevens said slapping him on the shoulder. "Go on pass with him one night and you'll see what I mean." More chuckles. "This is Hawk." He pointed at the marine sitting next to Hotshot. He had even broader shoulders, a square jaw and was barrel chested with huge slabs for hands. His midsection wasn't quite as slim as Hotshots's but was still flat underneath his uniform jacket. His head was completely shaved and had a kind of sheen to it, however his face was already sporting 5 o'clock shadow. "He's the squad's MP you do not want to be on his bad side."

"Just don't do anything against the law," Hawk said his voice deep with just a hint of a southern accent. "And we'll get along just fine. If you do break the law, my cut to look the other way is 30 percent." More laughs.

"Then we have Ghost," Stevens said pointing at the next marine. Ghost was scrawny compared to Hawk and Hotshot. He was trim all the way around with decent sized arms and shoulders. His muscles were toned but not large and he had a baby face that was devoid of any hair, the hair on his head was cut at the regulation: high and tight. His fingers were cut and scrapped from the tips to the knuckles as well as stained black indicating he worked with them a lot in tight spaces. "His the squad gunsmith and armorer. He's really good at his job but if you need him for any other kind of detail then you just can't seem to find the bastard."

"For the record I'm not hiding," Ghost explained. "I have just strategically misplaced myself. I fix the weapons and for the right price I can add some custom mods not clean bulkheads."

"What kind of mods?" Zimmerman asked curious.

"Don't like how your BR only shoots in three round burst want it to shoot on full auto?" Ghost asked. "I can do that. Want a custom paint job or design etched into your weapon I can do that to."

"Next is Raptor the fastest thing on two legs and squad medic," Stevens said pointing at the first of only two females in the room. She was tall and slender with a tough but delicate face. She had dark tanned, flawless skin, dark eyes and dark hair that was pulled back into a tight bun.

"That's right," Raptor said eyeing the two FNGs up. "My motto: the louder you scream the faster I come." Zimmerman's breath caught in his chest and his face flushed ever so slightly as he understood the double entendre. This got a pleased smile from Raptor and all the others burst out laughing, Vilan didn't understand and only chuckled slightly not seeing what was so funny.

"She does everything twice as fast as any medic," Stevens explained. "She'll have you patched up and ready to fight again in under 30 seconds."

"Just remember I do everything twice as fast as any other medic, everything," She said putting real emphasis on the last word and narrowing her eyes at Zimmerman, who's flush deepened. This got another round of laughter.

"Why do you have to be so curl?" Ghost asked between laughs. "They're just out of basic." Raptor just shrugged and turned to look at her cards again.

"And finally there's Fox," Stevens said pointing at the last ranger and other female at the table. "Squad's heavy weapon specialist." She was shorter then Raptor with wider shoulders and her face was just tough looking but still covered in flawless smooth skin. Her arms were slightly bigger and more toned then Ghost's. Her blood red hair was cut close to her head, not as close as Ghost's, but Hotshot had longer hair. She didn't say anything but crossed her arms and nodded as she narrowed her eyes at Vilan.

"This is Privates Jones and Zimmerman," Stevens said pointing at the two FNGs. "Zimmerman's going to be the new R.O."

"I hope he fairs better than our last one," Hawk said getting even more laughs and causing Zimmerman to gulp as his throat dried up.

"Jones is going to be the squad's mortar men and assistant heavy gunner," Stevens explained. "Your assistant." He nodded towards Fox. She turned to look Vilan over still with crossed arms and finally spoke.

"You get me killed and I swear I'll kill you myself," She said her tone serious and only the massive Hawk dared a small chuckle. He then picked up a canteen that was on the table in front of him and took a drink from it. Zimmerman eyed it since his throat was very dry after the last comment by Hawk.

"You want some?" Hawk asked holding the canteen out his sharp eyes



not missing the tiny expressions on Zimmerman's face.

"Thanks," Zimmerman said taking the canteen and placing it to his lips. He tilted it back and the liquid flowed into his mouth but it wasn't water it was strong alcohol that tasted like cinnamon and apples. Zimmerman lowed the canteen quickly and spat out what was in his mouth onto the floor as he started to cough.

"Good shit right?" Hawk asked as the others laughed a second time at Zimmerman's expense. "Monkey makes it to degrease engines. However it's 155 proof so I gave it a little flavor using some spiced apples from an MRE and boom you've got Hawk's Artillery Fire." Zimmerman backed away wiping his mouth more unsure now: drinking and gambling on duty what have we gotten into?

"So can I deal you two in for the next hand?" Hotshot asked. "Always happy to take new guys' money."

"Not today," Stevens said. "They still got to meet Monkey and Ivan then they have to see Vinny."

"Wow only a sergeant for three days and you're running around with you head cut off," Hotshot remarked. "Bet you wish Buzz didn't buy it."

"Me and him both," Stevens said turning to walk out with Zimmerman and Vilan in toe as the others laughed. "All right we'll meet Ivan next." Stevens lead them through more twisting corridors with practiced ease. He finally lead them into a room that was divided in half by a chest high counter that a wire mesh gate started at and ran up to the ceiling. Expect for a four by four square that was uncovered but a roll down gate could be pulled down to block that off as well. Behind the counter were shelves that were full of boxes and crates. Stevens walked up to the window and leaned in placing his hands on the counter. "Ivan you here you crazy bastard!"

"Yes! Yes I'm here!" A voice thick with a Russian accent shouted from around a corner that was behind the counter. A second later a marine walked around the corner and up to the counter. His brown hair was buzzed and his mustache was neatly trimmed. He large arms were covered in hair as well, even his knuckles had hair on them as he rested them on the counter like Stevens. "What is you want sergeant?"

"Just want you to meet the new guys," Stevens said stepping to the side and beckoning them forward. Vilan and Zimmerman slowly started to move up to the window.

"Yes you come, hurry up," Ivan said beckoning as well. Zimmerman and Vilan rushed up to the window and they stood in front of it. They could see his actual last name was long and neither could even begin to try and say it and the shiny silver bar of a first lieutenant pinned to Ivan's collar. They both snapped to attention and saluted. Ivan quickly jerked around looking behind them. "Someone behind me?" He asked. He then turned around and looked at the rank on his collar. "Oh that. That nothing but a piece of metal. I no order you round." He took the rank off and set it on the counter. "Now you, me, same da?"

"Ivan here is our supply officer," Stevens explained. "Since we are

meant to deploy quickly we can't be waiting around for gear we should already have. So our company has its own supply section. If we've got it you get it, no waiting around."

"Is right," Ivan said. "If you want it I got it you get it. I don't got it I get then you get. If you want something special I can do that as well."

"Such as what sir?" Vilan asked.

"You want drink I got," Ivan said with a kind smile. "Need porno I got. Like a flashbang I got, no questions asked always fun at parties. I also do weapons." He explained his speed of speech increasing as he reached down and pulled up a rather strange looking pistol to Vilan and Zimmerman's eyes. "357 magnum. Six shots only, slowly reload, kicks like bitch. If you hit target they won't get back up." He reached down and pulled up a different pistol. "Colt 1911. Least 500 years old, 45 caliber, seven round magazine semi automatic pistol. I give you good price, always good to trade as well."

"Look weren't not here to shop," Stevens said. "We have a lot of work to do."

"Ah look at you," Ivan said putting his hands on his hips. "Big time sergeant now. No time for friends. Is fine I understand. You two come back if you see anything you like."

"Thanks Ivan," Stevens said walking out with Zimmerman and Vilan right behind them.

"See later Jack," Ivan called after him. "I got good price on knife to." Stevens half smiled at the inside joke. He lead them through the corridors again till they opened up into a large bay like area. It was full of UNSC vehicles, all kinds, in different stats of repair and disassembly or assembly depended on how one looked at it. Robotic arms hung from the ceiling along with cranes and hoists. Along one wall was a rack of tools(both power and hand) and spare parts with rolling tool chests also full of tools. There was a small radio on one of the chests soft music was playing from in a beat and rhythm that neither Zimmerman or Vilan had heard before. A man was singing about being bad to the bone and neither of them knew what that meant either. The only other sound was that of a wrench ratcheting steadily. The three looked around and soon found the source of the sound: a tank that a pair of boots were sticking out from under. Stevens walked up to the boots and stood there moment just before he kicked them.

"Hey Monkey!" He shouted. There was a dull thud then metal chattering on metal as the wrench fell to the ground under the tank.

"You son of a bitch!" The boots shouted the voice muted by the tank's metal body. "I'll kill ya!"

"Is that anyway to talk to a NCO?" Stevens asked.

"Oh my apologies sergeant, staff sergeant, gunnery sergeant," The boots said listing off all the ranks to be safe. "Master sergeant, first sergeant, sergeant major, master gunnery sergeant, or the one and only: sergeant major of the starfleet command marine

corps."

"You forgot corporal," Stevens said.

"Fuck you Jack," The boots said as they pulled themselves from under the tank. He got to his feet then. He was tall, not as tall as Vilan but still pushing 6' 7" with long arms and trim midsection. He had taken his uniform jacket off and his shirt was stained black with grease along with his hands and arms up to his elbows. He took a stained rag from his back pocket and wiped his hands on them although much didn't come off of them.

"This is Monkey," Stevens said placing a hand on his shoulder having to reach up to do it. "The best damn grease monkey in all of the corps. He can fix anything and everything and if he can't know one can. However he just works on our section's vehicles."

"So what's with the slick sleeves?" Monkey asked referring to Vilan and Zimmerman's lack of rank, unit patches or combat patches that would have been on their uniform sleeves.

"There the newest member of the unit," Stevens explained.

"Please tell me they are wrench turners," Monkey said stuffing the rag back into his back pocket. "After we lost Gear and Piston I've been swamped. Well we've always been swamped but now doubly so cause it's just me."

"Sorry they're not," Stevens said patting Monkey's shoulder.

"What happen to the one called Gear?" Vilan asked.

"The bastard retired on me," Monkey explained pulling a pack of cigarettes from his pocket on his shin. "Severed his 20 years and got out full benefits." He shook a cigarette out and stuck it in his mouth. He then took a match and held it in his fist and flicked his thumb up to light it. He held it up to the end of the cigarette till it glowed red. After that he shook the match out but when he did the grease on his left arm caught fire. The flame was a strange blue and instead of freak out like he should have he calmly slapped the flame out. "Hate it when that happens don't you?" He asked exhaling a cloud of smoke.

"What happen to Piston then?" Zimmerman asked.

"Took a needle round through the eye," Monkey said evenly inhaling more smoke. "Blew half his face off."

"Oh," Zimmerman said coughing awkwardly.

"Hey I hate to dump more work on you but I got a Warthog with a blown engine," Stevens started.

"Oh no Jack," Monkey said holding up his hands cigarette in the corner of his mouth. "I have two transmissions I got to change out of those tanks. Then I got one tank that has been turned into Swiss cheese. I have to re-haul all the armor plating and all four tracks, the only reason we don't scrap it is because the engine still runs and the cannon works."

"You'll figure it out," Stevens said patting Monkey on the back. "Oh can you watch them for a few minutes? I have to run and get their appointments set up with Vinny."

"What am I suppose to do with them?" Monkey asked as Stevens walked away.

"I don't know show them around the hogs," Stevens suggested just before he left the maintenance bay.

"So what's you twos' names," Monkey asked exhaling more smoke.

"Private Zimmerman," Zimmerman said. Monkey held out his hand and he shook it.

"Private Jones," Vilan said also shaking Monkey's hand.

"Well there Jones," Monkey said smoke coming out of his mouth. "I'd thought I'd never see the day I found anyone taller than me. How tall are you?"

"Seven feet eight inches sir or sergeant," Vilan said as he was trained when he didn't know a marine's rank. This caused Monkey to smile.

"Well Jones as my grandpa would say," Monkey said exhaling smoke. "You've got some long bones on ya. Oh and I'm a lance corporal but you can just call me Monkey like everyone else."

"When will Sergeant Stevens be returning?" Vilan asked.

"Don't know," Monkey admitted. "But I hope soon."

"He seems like a good NCO," Zimmerman said in an attempt to make small talk.

"Yeah ol' Jack Knife is good shit," Monkey said dropping his butt to the ground and stomping it out with his boot. "You'd do well to listen to him. He'll get you squared away."

"Jack Knife?" Zimmerman asked after he and Vilan exchanged glances.

"What you thought Jack was his first name?" Monkey asked. "Hell I don't know his first name, no Jack is short for Jack Knife. I'm sure you've guessed by now but we all have nicknames, you'll get yours after your first mission either based on your job, skill, or what you have done. Good or bad."

"Jack Knife?" Zimmerman asked again.

"I take it he hasn't told you the story," Monkey said lighting a second cigarette. Zimmerman shook his head. "A few missions ago we were dropped in to hit a enemy supply convoy. We were dropped by pods so we were lightly equipped."

"Drop pods?" Zimmerman asked. "Like the ODST use?"

"Yeah, what you think they're special because they always drop by

pods?" Monkey asked. "You know what the diffidence is between us and them? They have better training, better weapons, better equipment and better funding yet we're asked to do the same things. More often then not even more dangerous since we cost less than an ODS." "

"I see," Zimmerman said.

"Any way we hit the convoy without a hitch," Monkey explained. "Textbook complex ambush, got 'em in a choke point for an elevated position 'n' everything. There was nothing left of the convoy. But our intel was bad, the bone heads thought they were going to the main base of operation so we set up the ambush site far from the base. However where they were really going was an outpost we or the intel geeks didn't know was there. That outpost was only a few miles out from that ambush site. Their response was quick and brutal, put us in full retreat. They pushed us past our primary LZ and overran our secondary. They pushed us all the way back to a wooded area." Monkey finished his second and reached for a third but thought better of it.

"So we made it to a kind of clearing," Monkey said continuing his story. "The platoon was spread all over hell's half acre. Then Buzz Saw says were going to blow an emergency LZ, where we use dete cord to knock down small trees and any other obstacles, and set up a RV point right there to regroup and prepare for extraction. He orders us to form a perimeter and only engage if we had to. The only break that we caught was the Covenant forces had lost us in those woods. We were also damn near black on ammo most of us down to just a pistol. Ol' Jack Knife didn't even have that. It was me and him on a hill looking down when to split...Elites started walking towards us. It was clear they didn't know we were there and would miss us but would still hit the E LZ. I pulled my pistol I only had one and half a mag left not nearly enough to take those two down."

"So what did Jack Knife do?" Monkey asked lighting a third cigarette anyway. "He pulls his combat knife and drops down on one of them. Lands on his shoulders and starts stabbing him in the neck. Blood's spraying everywhere the split ja- Elite falls to his knees and Jack Knife is still stabbing him. What's the other Elite doing just standing there watching and then Jack gets up after killing the other holding the knife at his side. The other Elite has his plasma rifle leveled at Jack who just stands there and looks at him. If it was me I would have just shot Jack and been done with it, not this guy though. No the motherfucker throws down his rifle and pulls an energy from his belt and activates it. Now that had quite a reach over Jack's eight inch combat knife so the Elite charges him. Jack holds his ground and right when the motherfucker is about to cut him in two he side steps and drops to one knee cutting the side of the Elite's leg. He does it with such force it goes pass his shield and the bastard falls on his face. Before he can even think about getting up Jack is on him and drives his knife through the back of his head."

"Then Hotshot radios me and Jack having seen the whole thing," Monkey explained finishing his third cigarette. "Then he says 'Holy shit he just jacked them up with a fucking knife. Way to go Jack Knife.' The name just stuck. The ones that were still alive made it to the E LZ and we got the hell out of there, but not before Buzz Saw bought it leaving the squad with no squad leader. They promoted Jack to fill the hole once we got back in orbit."

"He sounds like a outstanding warrior," Vilan remarked.

"Agreed," Monkey said just before he clapped his hands together. "Alright Jack wants me to show you about the 'hogs since we use them a lot." He lead them over to a complete Warthog and placed a hand on the steering wheel. "This is the UNSC light reconnaissance vehicle more commonly known as a Warthog. Also called 'Hog, truck, jeep or POS depending on its repair. Now there is no keys to these but if you look to the left of the wheel you'll see a switch that turns to: \_off, run, engine start \_and a light that says wait. To start it just turn the switch to run and the light comes on, that's the glow plugs warming the engine it takes longer in colder conductions. Once it goes out turn it all the way and hold it there till the engine starts." He started the engine and let it run for a few moments before he turned it off. "Everything you need to know about the vehicle is displayed on the gages to the right of the wheel. Everything from fuel to battery charge."

"Next we have coms," Monkey explained pointing to the 'Hog's built in radio. "It works just like you suit's coms except with longer range. This is the most important piece equipment the radio." He said pointing at a small portable radio that was held by bungle cords between the driver and passenger seats.

"I believe you said that was the radio?" Vilan asked pointing at the radio Monkey had pointed at first.

"No I said that was the coms," Monkey explained. "This is the radio it plays music like that one over there." He pointed at the radio over on a tool chest as a different man sang about a bad moon on the rise. "We take turns over who gets to choose the music. Now in the passenger seat as you can see I have mounted an LMG so the passenger can have some decent fire power and protect the left side. The mount I made it is impossible to turn it pass the front of the Hog so you can't cap the driver. In the back is the main mounted gun you two should get familiar with it since all new guys always get to be the gunners."

"Alright," Stevens said his booming voice echoing around the bay. "Jones you're off first to see Vinny. Zimmerman you stay here with Monkey as he goes over a PMCS with you." Monkey groaned out loud.

"Alright kid roll up your sleeves," Monkey said walking over to the 'Hog and lifting the hood.

"Jones follow me," Stevens said walking out of the bay. Vilan hesitated for just a second not wanting to leave the only familiar face behind. But an order was an order so he quicken his pace to catch up with Stevens now known as Jack Knife. He lead them to one of the ship's armories and the counter that separated the weapons from the rest of the ship. A Gunnery Sergeant Leonardo stood at the counter's window.

"Got another one for you Vinny," Stevens said.

"Once again," Leonardo said a thick Italian accent presence in his voice giving him the nickname. "My name is Leonardo, Gunnery Sergeant Leonardo."

"My apologies gunnery sergeant," Stevens said handing him a form. "I need you to kit him out." Stevens then walked out but just before he left. "See you later Vinny." Sighing heavily Leonardo looked at the form and then at Vilan.

"So Private Jones," Leonardo said reading the form. "It seems you already have most of your TA50 everything but weapons. This will be my easiest issue ever." He then looked up from his form and looked Vilan over. "Tell me any relations to an Allen Jones?"

"Yes sergeant," Vilan explained. "He is my father."

"Really," Leonardo said with a smile. "The crazy son of a bitch actually did it, married an Elite. Tell him he still owes me a sniper rifle."

"He is dead sergeant," Vilan explained dropping his gaze.

"I'm sorry," Leonardo said dropping his own gaze the smile gone from his face. He then walked back and pulled items from the racks and shelves behind the counter. He placed them on the counter and then read them off from the form Stevens had handed him pointing at each item as he read it off. "1 rifle, assault; 1 sling rifle, assault; 1 pistol, magnum; 1 holster, pistol; 1 knife, combat; 1 sheath knife, combat; 10 magazines rifle, assault 32 round; 7 magazines pistol, magnum 14 round. Sign here please." Leonardo handed him the form and Vilan signed his name at the bottom. He was about to start picking up the items off the counter when Leonardo stopped him. "No you leave those with me." Leonardo explained pick them up again and re-racking them. "You get them before you go on a mission don't worry."

"With live bullets too," Stevens said coming up behind Vilan startling him. "You done with him?"

"He's good to go," Leonardo said filing away the form.

"Well this here is Zimmerman and he need a full kit out," Stevens explained as Zimmerman walked into the room and nodded to Vilan. "Jones go take a shower and once you're done head to the galley for some chow."

"Of course sergeant," Vilan said snapping too. "Where is-"

"Walk back the way you came take a right and follow the arrows on the wall that say showers above them," Stevens explained. Then once you're done follow the ones that say galley above them."

"Yes sergeant," Vilan said leaving the armory at a fast march. He followed Stevens advice and the arrows and soon stood in front of a door that had Showers written above it. Still he stood in the corridor as he rubbed the back of his head unsure of what to do. The reason for this was that there were two doors with the word showers above them. There was no more writing on or above them but each had a different symbol. One had a blue background and was a circle on top of a square with two thin rectangles underneath the square. The other had a pink background with a circle on top but instead of a square underneath it there was a triangle and below that was the two thin rectangles. Vilan knew the shapes but since everything he had come to know of human culture had been through an all male company basic

training he had no idea what they meant in that configuration. He opened the door with the pink symbol on it first and peered inside. It was a white tiled room both the floor and walls tiled. There was an area with lockers and benches first and then a larger area with shower heads set into the wall in a square around the larger room. Vilan let the door closed and looked inside the other one and found it to be exactly the same and both void of any other personal. With a shrug he opened the door with the pink symbol, since that was the one that he stood in front of first, and walked in.

He pulled a fresh towel from a shelf of neatly folded ones and set it on the bench. He then started to undress starting with his uniform jacket. Soon he was nude his uniform folded neatly onto the bench since he didn't have a lock for a locker. Vilan walked into the showers and chose one in the corner that gave him the most privacy and turned the water on. He let it flow over his head for a few moments before he used the wall mounted soap dispenser to get a nice pile of liquid soap into his claw. He washed himself quickly and thoroughly and then rinsed himself. He let the water flow over him aimlessly for a few moments as he did so he heard the door open and shut. Someone else was coming to shower as well, that was his cue to be done so he turned the water off. Grabbing his towel off the hook by the shower he dried himself off quickly and then wrapped it around his waist. He walked out of the showers and back into the area with the lockers. There Fox had her back to Vilan as she finished undressing to prepare for her own shower. Again since Vilan was use to showering with others thinking it a human thing he didn't know his mistake.

"Greetings Fox," Vilan said cheerfully raising a hand. Fox whipped around at the deep voice behind her. Her eyes grew wide in shock at the naked Elite as he walked over to his pile of cloths. She grabbed her uniform jacket and held it in front of her as she screamed in anger. Vilan whipped back around taken back by the outburst. "Is something wrong?" Vilan asked concerned.

"YES THERE FUCKING IS!" Fox shouted. "WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING THE GIRL'S SHOWERS?!"

"What do you mean?" Vilan asked only more confused.

"CLOSE YOUR FUCKING EYES!" Fox ordered. Vilan did as instructed and closed his eyes. He kept them closed tell he felt something shoving him from behind. He opened them and looked behind himself to see Fox shoving him towards the door. "CLOSE YOUR EYES AND LOOK STRIGHT AHEAD!" She ordered and Vilan complied again. As Vilan slid across the floor, his feet and heels still wet, his towel fell from his waist and Fox let out a angry grunt. With one last shout of angry Fox shoved Vilan out the door and into the corridor. Just before she disappeared back inside she threw his uniform and boots at him, they landed in a heap in front of him. Vilan watched the door slam shut only more confused, but then remembered he was still nude and quickly got dressed. After he was dressed and presentable he walked to the galley. He picked up a tray and a navy cook stared at him as he waited for Vilan to tell him what he wanted, Vilan used to not have a chose didn't say anything. Sighing the cook picked for him and then handed the full tray back to Vilan who turned to look at the empty and half full tables unsure of where to sit.

"Jones over here," Zimmerman said raising a hand. Vilan walked over



and sat across from his friend they were the only two at the table. "What took you so long? I didn't see you in the showers either."

"I-" Vilan started but then Fox slammed her hands on the table startling the two. They both turned to look at her but she only stared at Vilan with burning eyes.

"You ever do it again," She said slowly voice strained to keep from shouting. "Or if you every speak of it I will slit your throat. Understand?"

"Yes," Vilan said bowing his head.

"Good," Fox said just before she stormed off.

"What is 'it'?" Zimmerman asked.

"I cannot discuss it," Vilan said as he started to eat. The two would eat their meal in silence after that.

### 13. Raid

A few days after Vilan and Zimmerman had arrived at their new unit they found themselves playing poker with the rest of their squad. All expect Monkey and Sergeant Stevens(or Jack knife depending on who you asked) who were too busy with other tasks for games of leisure. That left Hotshot, Hawk, Ghost, Raptor, Fox, Zimmerman and Vilan(they hadn't earned their nicknames yet) seating around the makeshift table on over turned footlockers. Being the two new guys to the unit they lost more hands then they won but it was Vilan you was truly awful at the game. He had no idea how to play and only got a crash course from Hotshot. He didn't understand bluffing and he would often asked questions that would give away his hands. The others were quick to take advantage of this, all expect Zimmerman, and soon he had the least amount of money left. Now there was a large amount of money in the pot this hand, a large lumpy pile of live ammunition seating in the middle of the table representing that. The rangers stared at their hands and each other trying to gage who was bluffing and who might actually have something. All expect Vilan who looked at his cards before rubbing the back of his head unsure, before he asked ones of those questions.

"What is it called if ones had five of the same symbols?" Vilan asked. "Such as all of the diamond symbols."

"A flush," Hotshot said as he looked at his own hand a little unsure of the quality of his hand now.

"Then is there an advantage for the cards to be in numerical order?" Vilan asked as he looked closer at his cards. "Such as a two, a three, a four, a five and a six?"

"Yeah," Hotshot said throwing down his hand. "It's called a straight flush and it's the best hand in the games. I fold."

"I fold," Hawk said throwing down his own hand.

"I'm out," Ghost said gently placing his cards on the table.

"I'll fold as well," Raptor said collapsing her cards into one stack and placing them on the table. Fox didn't say anything but tossed her cards on the table.

"I'm out," Zimmerman said. "Good job buddy." Zimmerman slapped Vilan on the back who had just won by default since everyone else folded. His mandibles twisted into a sly smile as he flipped over his cards showing he had a ten, an ace, a two, a seven and a four all off suit expect for the ace and seven. He reached into the middle of the table and pulled his winnings closer to him while everyone else stared at him in shock.

"That son of a bitch just hustled us," Hotshot said crossing his arms. "You going to do anything about that officer?" He asked turning to face Hawk.

"Well," Hawk started when Vilan tossed him a 50 cal round that was used for mounted turrets and represented 500. "I didn't say anything." Hawk said as he picked up the large round.

"How do you like that?" Hotshot said in disbelief. "Cops they're all crooked." Hawk just shrugged as he added the round to his pile.

"Technically he didn't do anything wrong," Hawk explained. "He just asked a question and we all assumed he had what he asked about."

"I know still fucking sucks," Hotshot said as he collected the cards and started shuffling the deck.

"Stand to rangers," Stevens said walking into the bunkroom.

"Ah, care to play a hand Jack?" Hotshot asked as he shuffled the cards.

"Nope," Stevens said. "Police up those cards we have a mission and briefing in five minutes."

"A typical sergeant," Hotshot remarked as he stood up, opened his footlocker and started shoving his remaining 'chips' into it. "Comes in and just kills all the fun."

"Stow it," Stevens said. "You get to do the one thing you're good at, kill things from a distance. Meet in the briefing room in four minutes."

"You just said five," Ghost pointed out as he stowed his own chips.

"That was before Hotshot was flapping his gums for a minute," Stevens explained.

"Get lost sergeant," Hawk said with a chuckle. "We'll be there." Vilan and Zimmerman still having the basic mindset had already stowed their gear and were standing at attention ready for orders.

"See Jones and Zimmerman didn't complain," Stevens pointed out. "And they're already to go well before the rest of you. You two follow me."

"Yes sergeant," Zimmerman said for the two of them. The two privates followed the sergeant through the twisting corridors that they were slowly starting to learn. They were nearing a room that several other rangers were walking into. They had almost made it when a gunnery sergeant blocked their path. He stood there eating something out of a bag that was purple and looked to be very chewy.

"Are these my two new marines?" He asked munching on whatever it was he was eating.

"Yes gunny," Stevens explained his voice taking on a uncomfortable note. "Privates Jones and Zimmerman, this is Gunnery Sergeant Blackbird your platoon sergeant."

"A pleasure to meet you gunnery sergeant," Vilan said snapping to attention.

"You know when they told me I was getting a slack jaw I didn't believe them," Blackbird said shoving more of the food into his mouth. "Now I see they weren't lying. Kind of short for a slack jaw ain't ya?"

"Uhm gunny," Stevens said. "We really need to get to the briefing."

"Oh right," Blackbird said. "You want some jerky, I made it myself." He held it out closer to Vilan who started to reach of it when Stevens slapped his arm down.

"We really have to get going gunny," Stevens said gently pushing Vilan and Zimmerman pass Blackbird and into the briefing room. "You two would do best to avoid Psycho." Stevens whispered. "Especially you." He nudged Vilan. "And never eat any of his jerky."

"Why," Zimmerman asked. As they took their seats near the back of the stadium style seating of the briefing room.

"Just don't," Stevens snapped. "Never call him Psycho to his face either." Zimmerman was about to asked why again when the rest of their squad walked into the room and sat in the same row as them.

"We're here on time Jack," Hotshot remarked. Stevens said nothing as the rest of ranger B Company showed up and filled all the rest of the seats. Once the company was inside the room a low mumble was heard as the rest of the rangers had their own conversations.

"ON YOUR FEET!" Someone one shouted as a captain entered the room. The rangers got to their feet and snapped to attention. The captain walked to the center of the room and stood behind a podium in the front of the room.

"Take, seats," The captain ordered. The marines sat down in unison, backs straight, heels together. "At easy." The marines relaxed either slumping back in their seats or leaning forward.

"Captain Dixon," Stevens whispered to Zimmerman and Vilan. "Company commander." Vilan and Zimmerman nodded but remained quiet as Dixon started his briefing.

"Greeting gentlemen," Dixon said. Hotshot nudged Fox with a smile on his face. Fox punched him in the arm hard enough to cause him to rub it. Since they were in the back their actions went unnoticed by Dixon. "We have just entered orbit around Sole 7. It was a small mining and forest colony set up to harvest its resources before the first war. There was a long and bloody conflict here during the first war before but it was one of the few we won. After the war it has become a largely populated colony. It seems the Covenant have unfinished business here for they had launched an invasions 36 hours ago. 12 hours ago the task fleet has taken control of the space around the planet. Now it up to us to retake the surface."

"Now fourth and third platoon will be landing and securing an area to set up a FOB for sector 8," Dixon said caring on with his briefing. "We don't expect to have any resistance. Your are to land and dig in as the 832nd infantry battalion lands to secure the area with the 83rd combat engineers to establish the FOB. First platoon we have a special task for you. It seems a company of Helljumpers dropped in to evac a city the Covenant was setting up an outpost nearby. They managed to get everyone out but the city had fallen under siege before they were able to pull out. You have to give the bastards credit for the manage to hold off the assault but now both side are at a standstill. The Covenant forces have encircled the city and they can't get in and the jumpers can't get out. However it will only be a matter of time before the jumpers run out of food or ammo."

"That's where we come in," Dixon explained. "The Covenant forces that would normally be stationed at the outpost are entrenched around the city. First platoon will drop and launch a raid on the under guarded outpost in the hopes to get at least some of the entrenched forces to pull back. When that happens second platoon is going to roll in heavy and punch a hole in the defenses around the city to get the Helljumpers out. Alright your platoon sergeants and leaders have the rest of the details so break down into platoons to get your secondary briefing. Dismissed."

"This way," Stevens said gesturing to Vilan and Zimmerman. They followed him to a area of the room that a group of rangers had formed a horse shoe around Blackbird and a lieutenant. "Lieutenant Armstrong platoon commander." Stevens whispered.

"Alright," Armstrong said clapping his hands together a single time. "We're going to be dropped five miles out from the outpost."

"What's are insertion method sir?" Monkey asked.

"A no landing vehicle insertion," Armstrong said.

"Ahhh," Monkey groaned out loud. "I just finished changing out the shocks from last time."

"I'll make sure to get you a medal for your sacrifice," Armstrong said getting chuckles from the rest of the platoon. "Once we're on the ground we have to move at top speed to the outpost. Once there do not dismount just raise as much hell as possible. Once the forces around the city start to pull back you are to engage them as well. Then once things get too hot we are to break contact. If they don't follow us great, if they do even better. For we will be leading them into an ambush set up by fourth and third platoon once the 832nd

lands. Any questions?"

"Yes sir," Vilan said before Stevens could stop him. "Does this mean we are going into combat sir?" Here more chuckles from the platoon.

"Yes Private Jones it does," Armstrong said with a smile. "If there are no other questions form squads. Squad leaders I want your squads kitted out and formed up in launch bay 3C in 15. Fallout." Armstrong with Blackbird at his side walked out of the room as the rest of the platoon circled around their squad leaders. Hotshot, Hawk, Ghost, Raptor, Fox, Monkey Zimmerman and Vilan had circled tightly around Stevens.

"Alright," Stevens said. "I'll keep this short. Get in fully battle rattle and meet at our armory in 5. Let's move."

"Oorah!" They shouted just before they filed out of the room and jogged to their locker room. Vilan opened his locker and looked at the neatly arranged gear inside just before he started ripping it off of hangers and shelves as he hurried to strap on his armor. After his armor was on his pulled on his helmet and orange tinted glasses that a HUD was displayed on. The last thing he grabbed was his father's knife and tucked it into his right boot. He was about to shut his locker when Stevens came up behind him.

"Make sure to grab your balaclava and dust goggles," Stevens said in full battle rattle with his own balaclava on but pulled down so it wasn't covering his chin and mouth yet. His goggles around the top of his helmet.

"Yes sergeant," Vilan said taking off his helmet and pulling on his balaclava that was normally used to keep a marine's face warm in colder environments. He strapped his helmet back on and placed the dust goggles that go over the eyes and glasses on the top of his helmet. He slammed his locker shut and jogged after Stevens, Zimmerman right behind him, their armor clicking as they ran. They made it to the armory where Leonardo was hurrying to hand out weapons and ammo. The two FNGs got in line being the last to do so. Soon Vilan was up to the window and Leonardo handed him his assault rifle, pistol and full magazines. Vilan was about to leave when Leonardo stopped him.

"Hang on," Leonardo said setting a large backpack on the counter. Strapped to the side of the pack was a collapsed 88mm mortar. Inside the pack were the shells for the mortar and strapped to the back and under the pack were ammo boxes for a LMG. "You also get this since you're the assistant heavy gunner." Vilan nodded and slipped his arms through the straps and pulled the heavy pack onto his shoulders. He jogged to catch up with the rest of the squad as they filed into the launch bay where Monkey was busy securing two Warthogs underneath a docked Pelican. The rest of the squad had formed up around Stevens as he gave a finally briefing.

"Alright," Steven said holding a battle rifle at the low ready. "Fox, Monkey, Ghost, Jones, Zimmerman and myself will ride in this Pelican." He hooked a thumb over his shoulder towards the Pelican Monkey was working with. "Hawk, Hotshot and Raptor will ride along with second squad till the drop. Any questions?" Everyone remained silent but Zimmerman had noticed something. Everyone of them had

something painted on their chest plate of their body armor. Hotshot had a simple message written in red letters: \_I can see you, but you can't see me. \_Hawk had a picture of a coiled snake with a simple warning underneath: \_Don't tread on me.\_ Ghost had a evil looking decaying and rotting head on his. Monkey had a Jolly roger on his but under the skull instead of crossed bones they were crossed wrenches. Raptor had a message written in neat white letters:\_ I shall do no harm...unless you're an enemy, sorry. \_Fox had a slender humanoid looking fox hiding in a patch of grass holding a rocket launcher. Even the professional Sergeant Stevens had written in neat large blocky letters: \_Front towards enemy. \_

"Uhm sergeant," Zimmerman started but didn't know what to say. However he touched his own bare chest plate.

"The UNSCMC does not allow or sanction the defacing of UNSC property," Stevens explained. "This includes but is not limited to the ballistic chest plate. If you do you will have to pay for its replacement. However if it sustains damage in the field to be rendered unusable then it has to be swapped out and any damage will be blamed on field damage and chalked up to a field loss."

"Ah," Zimmerman said understanding right away and knew he was going to have to explain it to Vilan.

"If you want something done," Stevens explained ."Talk to Ghost he thinks he's an artist. And like a true artist he doesn't take requests but instead will accept ideas and put his own spin on them. Alright lets mount up." Fox, Ghost, Jones, Zimmerman and Vilan boarded the Pelican just as Monkey was finishing up and he walked up the ramp taking a seat. The ramp closed as the pilot started the engines. Vilan and Zimmerman chose jump seats that were next to each other and strapped in. There was a shutter as the drop ship exited the ship and entered the vacuum. The drop ship started to shake and jump as they entered the planet's atmosphere. They rode in silence everyone calm, even Vilan, but Zimmerman was tapping his foot at a rapid fire pace. They all knew he was on the verge of freaking out.

"Hey," Ghost said. "Let me see your assault rifle."

"Uh sure," Zimmerman said as handed Ghost his rifle.

"Who now why this is the only weapon that is considered an assault rifle?" Ghost asked as he pulled out the magazine and started to break the rifle down.

"Uhm no," Zimmerman said as he forgot about the combat that he was going to see soon as he was to focused on what Ghost was doing.

"The definition off an assault rifle is a rifle with select a fire," Ghost explained as he tinkered with Zimmerman's assault rifle. "Now I know what you're thinking: But Ghost Jack knife's battle rifle has select a fire. Well It only has two modes safe and fire, and safe is not a fire mode, is it? Whereas with your rifle you have safe, semi and full rock 'n' roll." Ghost reassembled his rifle and handed it back to him. "Your rifle now fires slightly faster but with less recoil. You're welcome."

"Uh thanks," Zimmerman said accepting the weapon again.

"Vehicle assignments?" Monkey asked.

"You driver, Fox passenger, Jones gunner," Stevens said. "Ghost driver, myself passenger, Zimmerman gunner."

"Told you," Monkey said winking at Vilan. "New guys always gunners."

"Now Jones you're the assistant gunner," Stevens said. "I want you to stick to Fox like glue. Anywhere she goes you go understand."

"He might understand that too well," Fox remarked shooting Vilan a death glare. Vilan lowered his head and flushed slightly as the rest stared at the two confused.

"Anyway," Stevens said with a shrug. "Zimmerman you stick to me like your life depends on it."

"Roger that sergeant," Zimmerman said reloading his rifle.

"All that's left is to decide who get the radio on our vehicle," Monkey said. "If I remember it's my turn to choose."

"The hell it is," Fox said. "It's my turn."

"I don't think so," Monkey said crossing his arms.

"It seems we are at an impasse," Fox said crossing her own arms.

"Indeed," Monkey said. "There's only one way to solve this."

"Agreed," Fox said balling her hand into a fist. They then performed a ritual that Vilan had never seen before. Both had raised a fist into the air and brought them back down before raising them back up into the air again. They did this three times in a steady rhythm and on the third time down Fox stuck out two fingers of her fist while Monkey kept his balled up. A second later Monkey raised his fist into the air again and used it to hit Fox's two extended fingers gently.

"Radio is mine," Monkey said. Fox leaned back in her seat, crossed her arms again and grumbled to herself.

"We're below 10,00 feet," The pilot said over the ship's intercom. "Go ahead and pop the hatch."

"Alright bundle up," Stevens said pulling his balaclava up over his face hiding his chin, mouth and nose. He then pulled his goggles down from his helmet and over his HUD glasses. The rest of them followed his lead Vilan fighting with his balaclava a little due to his mandibles. Stevens unstrapped himself from his seat and knelt on the floor. He opened a hatch and when he did he let in a blast of icy air. As the air whipped around the troop compartment it tugged at their uniforms and chilled their bones.

Monkey, Jones, Fox!" Stevens shouted over the noise of the rushing wind. "You're up first!" Vilan unstrapped himself from his jump seat

and followed Monkey and Fox over to the open hatch. "Make sure you hang on tight!" Stevens said looking at Vilan. "Don't stand behind the gun yet! Just sit and strap yourself into the seat next to it!"

"Roger sergeant!" Vilan shouted himself. Monkey climbed through the hatch first and down into one of the 'Hog's driver seat. Fox was next moving into the passenger seat and strapping in. Vilan grabbed the side of the hatch firmly before lowing himself through. He managed to get himself into the backwards facing jump seat next to the turret as the wind whipped around him. As he strapped himself in he looked up to see Stevens climb into the driver seat of the other Hog. Followed by Ghost and then Zimmerman who after strapping himself in waved to Vilan.

"Hey buddy," Zimmerman said via the built in radio. Vilan keyed his own radio.

"Greetings friend," Vilan said. The Pelican hit an air pocket and jerked sharply the force gently swinging the two Warthog causing both Vilan and Zimmerman to grip their seats with death grips and a whoop from Monkey. As they rode in the suspended Warthogs the Pelican started to descend. They broke through the clouds a second later and the ground opened up in front of them. The ground hurried up to greet them as Vilan and Zimmerman hung on for dear life. All around them were other Pelicans with their own Warthogs hanging under them, also with rangers riding in them instead of the Pelican.

"We're nearing the insertion point," The pilot said over their radios. After hearing that Monkey started the engine and revived it a few times the wheels spinning pointlessly in the air. He turned on the radio and turned it up to max volume after placing a same data disk into it. A strange, lively beat started to pour from the speakers. "Some folks are born made to wave the flag!" Monkey shouted singling along with the song. "Oh that red white and blue! And when the band plays hails to the chief! Oh they point the cannon at you! It ain't me! It ain't me! I ain't no senator's son, son! It ain't me! It ain't me! I ain't no fortunate one, no!"

"How do you listen to this ancient shit?!" Fox demanded having to shouted above the wind and music.

"Because its fucking awesome!" Monkey explained. "It also pumps me up!"

"30 seconds," The pilot said over the radio. The ground had gotten much closer as trees, rocks and grass whipped by below them. The Pelican still got lower but started to reduce its forward speed. The pilot lowered his craft even more so the wheels of the 'hogs' where just a few feet off the ground as he slowed a little more. "First one away on my mark. ten, nine."

"Now Monkey you don't have to floor it!" Fox shouted as the pilot counted.

"What?!" Monkey mocked. "Floor it?! Alright!" Monkey pressed the gas pedal to the floor the engine making a high pitched whine.

"Monkey!" Fox shouted in anger.



"Hang on!" Monkey shouted to Vilan who already had a firm grip on his seat.

"Two, one...Mark," The pilot said calmly over the radio. A heartbeat later the pilot hit the release and the Warthog dropped from the Pelican. Vilan's and Fox's hearts both stopped as their stomachs jumped up into their throats.

"Wahooo hoooo!" Monkey shouted as they fell. After only a sickening second of free fall the spinning tires hit dirt. The Warthog lurched forward just before it bounced back up into the air. "Fuck yeah!" Monkey shouted as he raised a fist into the air. The hog touched down again and jumped forward as it bounced up a second time but not nearly as high. When it hit the third time it remained on the ground and started to fish tail before Monkey corrected it. He still had the pedal floored but let off slightly as not to red line the engine. "You can go ahead and get behind the turret!" Monkey shouted at Vilan. Vilan unstrapped himself and stood up behind the mounted gun and grabbed on to it. There was a solid thump as the other Warthog carrying Zimmerman landed. Vilan couldn't see Zimmerman's face due to the balaclava but wished he could. Vilan turned his attention back to the turret as the other Warthogs began to land. He lifted the weapon's hatch and placed a belt of ammo on the feed tray before he closed the hatch again. He then yanked back on the charging handle and let the bolt snap forward with a satisfying clack-crack.

Vilan gripped the machinegun tighter and bent his knees slightly as the Warthog moved along the rough terrain. He started looking for targets when the Pelicans flew over their heads heading back up into the sky.

"This Eagle flight," The pilot said over all their radios. "Drop complete leaving your AO." They flew off and disappeared just as a cluster of purple buildings came into view in the distance.

"All vehicles get into wedge formation over," Blackbird's voice ordered over the radio. The speared out Warthogs pulled together forming a rolling wedge as the buildings neared. They were close enough that Vilan could see tiny figures running around the buildings. "All gunners open fire." Blackbird ordered. Vilan swiveled the turret around and sighted in one of those figures, it was nothing more than just a speck. He jammed his thumbs down on the firing studs and fired a seven second burst at the speck. There was a delay from when he stopped firing till when the rounds actually hit kicking up dirt all around it.

"Hey!" Monkey shouted. "Go full hero on that thing! You don't have to worry about hitting them right now but if you do great! We're just trying to raise a little hell! Don't worry about it overheating either I took care of that as well!" Vilan nodded although Monkey couldn't see it. He jammed his thumbs down on the trigger again and moving the turret from side to side not really aiming but just sending rounds at them. Soon the vehicles reached the outpost and started to drive in a large circle around the outpost. The gunners firing almost wildly at the buildings, the Covenant troops that ran for cover and anything else. The passengers had opened up a well Fox firing her LMG at a fleeing Grunt before she tossed a grenade that landed next to a pile of crates. When it went off it set off the power cells stored inside resulting in a large blinding blue explosion. Vilan moved the turret just in time to catch one of his

own kind walk out of a building. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the two locked eyes as the unknown Elite's widened in confusion. Vilan didn't know if he could kill him as his target was about to pass out of sight as Monkey drove the Warthog to follow the one in front of him. Then the image of the carbine round punching through his father's throat flashed into his mind.

"May you never enter paradise!" Vilan shouted in his native tongue just before he fired the large rounds ripping the confused Elite apart. The Warthog completed its turn and a group of fleeing Grunts came into view and Vilan wasted no time in gunning them down his mandibles twisted into a sneer that was hidden by his balaclava. Monkey was about to start yet another loop around the outpost when Armstrong's voice came over the radio.

"Second platoon has hit some heavily resistance," He explained. "Some of the Covenant forces around the city are indeed heading towards us but not as many as were thought. A company of the 832nd has been dispatched to assist. Sergeant Stevens I want you to take your squad and support them anyway you can since their reinforcements are at least 20 minutes out. How copy over."

"Solid copy on all that," Stevens radios. "In route now over." Hearing that Monkey turned the wheel sharply causing the backend to fish tail and almost knocking Vilan off his feet. Monkey pulled next to Stevens's vehicle while Hawk pulled behind them Raptor behind the gun and Hotshot in the passenger seat. They moved at top speed heading to support second platoon and the fleeing Helljumpers. The city came into view and even from their distance they could see the firefight raging. "Pull off over there!" Stevens shouted pointing at a hill topped with a small cluster of trees. The three Warthogs came to a halt kicking up dirt and grass at the foot of the hill the engines still running. "Jones, Fox, Hotshot dismount here are cover our approach from the hill." Stevens ordered. "Monkey jump in Hawk's hog and leave yours here for them."

"You got it," Monkey said killing the engine. He ran up and took Hotshot's seat as Vilan and Fox dismounted. Fox paused only long enough to group a M41 launcher from the back and reloads. The three dismounted rangers ran up the hill as the other Warthogs sped off. Once they reach the crest Hotshot took the sniper rifle off his back, flipped down the bipod and took up good prone position. A second later he fired his first round the rifle's report echoing loudly. As that happen Fox had armed her first rocket and moved to a kneeling position.

"Range?" Fox asked.

"2000 meters," Hotshot said after checking his scopes range finder. She clicked the knob on the side of the launcher's scope five clicks before she re-shouldered the launcher and fired. Vilan had deployed the 88mm mortar after taking his pack off. This one had more range then the one he had used in basic. He used his bare eyes to spot a large group of Covenant forces on the outskirts of the city. He pulled a HE round from the pack, hung it and fired it. After a few heartbeats he watched it land scattering the enemy troops and kicking up dirt. He fired another one, then another firing them as fast he could go. Vilan was so focused on dropping rounds on the enemy he didn't hear Hotshot or see him get up running back down the hill. Nor did he see Fox as she dropped the launcher and also turned to run. He

did however feel her as she tackled him knocking him down the hill. Vilan ended up on his back at the foot of the hill with Fox sitting on his hips. There was a blinding flash and the ground shook as the plasma blob from the Wraith hit near the top of the hill.

"You fucking idiot!" Fox shouted still sitting on Vilan leaning in closer. "You have to pay fucking attention! I swear if you get me fucking killed!...I should've left you up there! AHHH!" Slamming her hands down on his chest she stood up and walking back up the hill only stopping to scoop up the fallen launcher. Even though she had yelled at him Vilan had felt strangely pleasant when she had been on top of him. As he slowly sat up the sound of laughing reached Vilan's ears. He looked over and saw Hotshot laughing loudly as he started back up the hill.

"May I inquire as to what is so humorous?" Vilan asked as he got to his feet.

"Yeah she fucking likes you," Hotshot said though laughs.

"That is her 'liking me'? Vilan asked only more confused jogging to catch up with Hotshot.

"Yeah she never would have risked her skin to save any other FNG's ass," Hotshot said laying back done to resume firing. Vilan saw the Wraith that had fired upon them burning below as Fox reloaded her launcher. Vilan was glad to see that his mortar was intact and resumed firing using all the shells he had. He picked up his assault rifle and was about to fire with that when a flight of Pelican flew over his head. They fired into the Covenant forces as marines roped down from other ones.

"This Hell Hounds," A voice said over all their radios. "We are out of the hot zone, thanks for the assist. I guess we owe you a few beers. Over."

"Damn right you do," Hotshot said into his radio. "Over."

"Hotshot," Stevens said over the radio. "Mount back up our mission is complete. It's up to the 832nd now. We got a RTB order over."

"Roger that over," Hotshot said getting to his feet and slinging his rifle. Vilan packed up his mortar and followed him down the hill. They got back into the 'hog Hotshot driving this time and headed in the direction of the would be FOB. Hawk's and Stevens's hog fell in next to them and Vilan looked over and counted all the passengers finding them all there. Zimmerman waved at him from behind his turret and Vilan waved back pride welling up in his chest. Although it wasn't exactly what he had in his mind as a 'ranger' mission. They had still seen their first combat mission and they had made it through unharmed.

#### 14. Loop and snoop

Vilan lay in his bunk of the prefab building that was serving as their barracks back at the FOB. He had just survived his first taste of combat, had even killed some of the enemy himself, and to celebrate that victory he lay sound asleep. For the first time since basic, since his father had been killed, he dreamed. It was a

pleasant dream one that caused his mandibles to twist into a smile as he slept.

He was dreaming he was back on his home planet and he was younger but more importantly his father was still alive. Vilan was walking through the still young crops only going up to his waist. He was walking towards his father who was sweating and toiling away tilling the land and pulling weeds. The crops went just a little higher than his father's knees as he swung the long handled tool at the dirt. Vilan crouched down so the crops went over his head hiding him from view as he still advanced on his working father. Once Vilan was within arm lengths of his father and he still had his back to the young Vilan as he worked the land. Vilan jumped out and landed on his father's back wrapping his arms around him.

"I have you father," Vilan said his voice already starting to become deep. His father let out a hardy laugh

"Yes you do little one," Jones said dropping his tool. He reached up and pulled Vilan off his back and placed him on the ground. "I don't know about you but I could take a break for lunch."

"As I could as well father," Vilan said looking up at his father.

"Good," His father said placing a hand on Vilan's head and started walking back towards their house. They reached their house and his father opened the door and let Vilan go in first. He walked in expecting to see his mother working in the kitchen food already on the table. Instead Vilan was his current age and height, dressed in a UNSC marine uniform and holding a tray of food. He was no longer in his house but a noisy mess hall where there was the low mummer of conversation and the sound of forks hitting metal trays. Vilan looked around and found himself standing in the middle of the mess hall between two tables and looked around for someone he knew. That's when he saw his father, also dressed in uniform seating at a table across the room. Vilan started to make his way over to him when Drill Instructor Willy got in his way.

"WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING PRIVATE!" Willy demanded. "THAT'S FOR MARINES ONLY! NOT FUCKING RECRUITS! UNDERSTAND?!"

"Sir yes sir!" Vilan shouted as he sat at a table with other recruits he didn't know. Vilan looked down and was about to start eating when he saw his tray was gone and replaced with an assault rifle. He quickly looked around and saw that he was sitting in a Pelican dropship jump seat with a squad of marines. Setting across from him was his father wearing his uniform and in full battle rattle like the rest of them. When Vilan was younger he hadn't know what his father's rank had been but now he knew he was a gunnery sergeant.

"Alright," His father said speaking to the squad. "This is it, actual combat. Remember your training, stick to cover and only move if someone has you covered. You do that and we all come back in one piece."

"Oorah!" The marines shouted in unison. His father then turned to look at Vilan and the two locked eyes.

"You ready marine?" He asked him. Vilan's chest swelled with pride

for his father had just called him a marine.

"Yes father," Vilan said. His father simply nodded and then reached across the ship and patted him on the shoulder. A second later the dropship shuttered as it landed and then the ramp dropped the marines rushing out. Vilan's father in the lead and Vilan himself right behind him. Suddenly there was the sound of a Covenant carbine firing and blood blossomed for his father's throat as he fell to the ground. Vilan stopped and dropped to his knees ripping his med kit from his belt as blood bubbled from his father's neck and mouth.

"MEDIC!" Vilan screamed at the top of his lungs. Vilan tried to get a dressing on the wound but it kept bleeding through. His CLS training told him there was nothing he could do and his father was going to bleed out in under two minutes this brought tears to his eyes. "Hang on father." Vilan said tears dripping from his eyes. "You're going to be fine." Vilan lied as he held his father's hand in his claw. "MEDIC!" Vilan screamed over his shoulder before looking at his father.

"Sorry," His father said weakly blood bubbling from his mouth. "All my fault."

"No father," Vilan said quickly tears still running down his face. "It is not your fault. It could never be your fault."

"Sorry," His father said barely above a whisper as he closed eyes.

"No," Vilan said shaking his father trying to get him to open his eyes. "Father you cannot leave me, not again. MEDIC!" Vilan screamed over his shoulder again before looking at his father again. "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, nononononono." Vilan said shaking his father trying to weak him up. He then started CPR pressing down on his father's chest knowing it would do no good but he refused to simply give in. "You can't leave me!" Vilan shouted as he continued with the chest compressions. When Vilan finally accepted the fact that his father was dead he tilted his head back and let out a rage filled roar.

Vilan awoke then sitting bolt upright in his bunk, lucky to get a top one for he would have hit his head if he had a bottom one. He looked around in fear that his roar had been real, but no one else seemed awake. Vilan dropped to the floor his bare feet hitting the cold metal floor and walked off to the bathroom. He stood in front of a skin, turned the water on and splashed some on his face. Feeling a little better he walked back to his bunk and jumped up carefully as not to wake Zimmerman who slept on the bottom bunk. Vilan lay on his back staring at the ceiling and remained that way till the lights snapped on telling it was time for wake up. Being already awake Vilan jumped down and went to his footlocker and started to pull a uniform it so he could change out of PTs.

"You're sure bright eyed and bushy tailed this morning," Zimmerman commented as he still sat on his bunk and yawned. Vilan stopped digging and looked over his shoulder to see his own back.

"I do not have a tail," Vilan remarked as he stripped off his PT trunks. Zimmerman sighed and rubbed his forehead it was too early in the morning for this.

"Just get dressed so we can go get some chow before the line gets too long," Zimmerman mumbled as he got up and stretched his back. He then walked to his own footlocker and pulled his hygiene kit out before heading to the bathroom to shave. Vilan meanwhile sat on Zimmerman's bunk to tuck his pants into his boots. After that he pulled on his uniform jacket and zipped it up before he smoothed it out getting out any wrinkles. Now fully dressed Vilan relocked his footlocker just as Zimmerman walked out of the bathroom a dot of shaving cream drying on his right earlobe. After Zimmerman got dressed while Vilan tightened up his bunk the two young marines left the barracks. Since they were still pretty fresh out of basic they were the first ones done and to leave to barracks.

The sun was just starting to come up bathing the FOB in a golden light the air just starting to get warm. They were forced to walk a mile to get to the mess hall but there was no line on the outside and only a short line on the inside. They got their trays loaded down with scrambled eggs, bacon, diced potatoes and toast. They sat across from each other at an empty table and started to eat at the fast pace they had learned in basic training. Once they finished eating shortly afterwards instead of immediately getting up they stayed sitting, unlike basic training.

"So what's the deal with you and Fox?" Zimmerman asked finishing his glass of red drink.

"What do you mean?" Vilan asked dropping his gaze to the bits of egg that were still stuck to his tray.

"Really?" Zimmerman asked raising an eyebrow. "The way she glares at you, man if looks could kill. Then she has to be going out of her way to avoid you it seems."

"I have not noticed," Vilan lied scraping his fork on his tray.

"Fine if you don't want to talk about," Zimmerman said with a shrug.

"How's it going?" Sergeant Stevens asked as he sat down at their table with his own tray. "How you two liking the rangers?"

"I can't complain sergeant," Zimmerman said with a shrug.

"How about you there Jones?" Stevens asked just before he shoved egg into his mouth.

"I have enjoyed my time here very much," Vilan said. "When will we see combat again sergeant?"

"Wow," Stevens remarked. "Most people do not look forward to combat. But as it so happens we have a mission in a few hours. After breakfast get into full battle rattle and meet at the armory."

"Yes sergeant," Vilan said getting to his feet picking up his tray.

"Wow cool your jets highspeed," Stevens said holding up a hand. "Take a seat and stay a bit you have a few hours." Vilan nodded and sat

back down just as Monkey did.

"Zimmerman and long bones Jones," He said cheerfully as he sat. "How the hell are you?"

"Well I woke up before the sun, on an planet millions of miles from my home and any family, fighting a superior enemy. So good I guess," Zimmerman said with a shrug.

"Outstanding," Monkey said still cheery. "How about you Jones? Sleep well and all that?" Vilan's dream flashed into his mind and shook his head a single time in an attempt to get rid of.

"I slept well enough," Vilan said wishing he could forget the dream.

"Excellent," Monkey said and then turning to face Stevens. "I've finished changing out the shocks on our vehicles from the last mission. You need anything else Jack?"

"Not right away," Stevens said after swallowing a mouthful of food.

"Morning," Ghost said taking his seat next to Vilan and started to eat. Stevens eyed him suspiciously Ghost seeing it. "Yes sergeant?" He asked.

"Didn't you have KP duty this morning?" Stevens asked as Ghost was supposed to be helping sever breakfast that morning.

"Funny story about that," Ghost explained. "I got up early to finish some adjustments to a batch of rifles and completely forgot. Also it seems the runner they sent after me couldn't seem to locate me." The last part Ghost said with a large cheesy smile. Stevens just sighed and shook his head and returned to his food. Hotshot and Hawk sat down then Hawk's tray have quite a bit more food on it then anyone else's.

"Good fucking morning," Hotshot said while yawning. Hawk just nodded to everyone just before he started to eat. "What's the brief?" Hotshot asked as he started on his toast.

"Wait for everyone to be present," Stevens said finishing his food and pushing his tray away from him. Raptor and Fox sat down at the same time just as Stevens finished his last thought. Raptor flashed a smile to the squad as Fox gave Vilan a death glare he had grown accustom to after that incident with the showers his first day.

"Speak of the fucking devil," Hotshot said. "We're all here, unofficial brief if you please sergeant." Everyone turned to face Stevens.

"Alright we have a simple loop and snoop," Stevens explained. "Dropped 10 clicks out and picked up 10 clicks from the objective. Command wants us to scout a small town a few miles from here. It was evaced before the Covenant could get there but there has been some unconfirmed reports that the refinery there is still operational. They want us to check it out to see if it's worth it to send engineers in to extract the fuel. Since there is really nothing there

for the Covenant to use the ONI spooks think they would have moved on. Meaning there should be no enemy contact."

"Key word there is 'should'," Hotshot said. "Loadout?"

"Standard light loadout," Stevens explained. "Going light on the ammo and that means you won't have your mortar Jones. Instead you'll be Fox's assistant gunner carry most of the ammo for her LMG and the launcher. Monkey you're Hotshot's spotter, Zimmerman you've got the radio and stick with Raptor and Ghost. Hawk you're with me, remember your battle buddy in case we get split up. Assault packs loaded with water, rations, extra shirts, socks, and wet weather gear."

"Support if shit goes to hell?" Ghost asked.

"We have a battery of the 23rd artillery regiment assigned to us," Stevens said. "So I hope Zimmerman remembers how call in a fire mission." Everyone turned to look at Zimmerman who held up his hands.

"I remember, I remember," Zimmerman reassured.

"Enjoy the rest of your morning," Stevens said getting to his feet. "I have to go receive another brief from the spooks. Be suited up and ready to step off no later than 1100."

"Will do Jack," Hotshot said for the table as Stevens walked away. Fox who hadn't said a word got up having finished her food and walked away giving Vilan another glare. Vilan watched her go wishing he could say something, anything to make it better. Zimmerman got to his feet as did Vilan and were about to walk away when Hotshot spoke.

"Jones stay for a minute I would like to speak with out," He said glancing at Hawk and Ghost who immediately got up and left. Vilan sat back down and Zimmerman was about to not understanding but Raptor got to her feet.

"Zimmerman I could use some help moving some creates of medical supplies I just got in," Raptor said her voice smooth as silk. Zimmerman looked at Raptor then at Vilan the look on his face saying he didn't want to leave his friend to do manual labor. "I would really appreciate it and would owe you one." She said with a devilish smile. Zimmerman flushed slight at he got to his feet again.

"Alright lets go," Zimmerman said with a heavy sigh to hide the fact he was blushing.

"I still out rank you," Raptor said lightly shoving Zimmerman as they walk out of the mess hall. "I could make this an order instead of a favor."

"I myself have a lot of work to do so I've got to go as well," Monkey said innocently as he got up and walked away himself. Hotshot meanwhile moved so he was seating across from Vilan and lowered his voice.

"Alright no bullshit what's the deal with you and Fox?" Hotshot asked. "I mean I haven't seen her look at anyone like that since her



ex-husband."

"She has a mate?" Vilan asked truly surprised.

"\_Had\_," Hotshot explained. "Good old case of CIDS. Corps induced divorce syndrome. Her husband cheated on her during her first tour she's been bitter every since...Goddamn it stop distracting me."

"I apologize," Vilan said respectfully.

"Relax," Hotshot explained. "Just screwing with you. Now I want to know what happened between you two. I have never seen her try to kill anyone with a look since her ex but I also haven't seen her stick her neck out for anyone since her ex."

"I cannot speak of it," Vilan explained. "She made it extremely clear I could not." A evil smile came to Hotshot lips.

"You've played poker with me so you know I can bluff," Hotshot explained crossing his arms. "I'll just simply say you did tell me even if you don't and she'll beat you anyway. Or you could tell me and I won't tell her." Vilan stared at Hotshot unsure of what to do until Hotshot raised an eyebrow.

"My first day in the unit when we were still on the ship," Vilan explained lowering his voice so Hotshot had to lean in to hear. "I went to take a shower but I didn't understand the symbols on the doors. I choose the wrong one."

"No," Hotshot said with a chuckle. "You walked in on her in the shower?"

"Not exactly," Vilan explained his face flushing. "More she saw me as I left. I was disrobed as was she."

"No," Hotshot said laughing. "That's just fucking awesome. So what are you go to do now?"

"In regards to what?" Vilan asked.

"Fox," Hotshot said with a small chuckle. "It's obvious she's into you, must have liked what she saw huh?"

"I believe it is the opposite," Vilan said.

"That's just an act," Hotshot explained.

"Are you sure?" Vilan asked.

"Trust me," Hotshot said getting to his feet. "You should try talking to her. But only after the mission usually killing some gas suckers and buzzards puts her in a better mood." Vilan watched him go thinking about what he had said for a few minutes before he got to his feet as well. A few hours later after a official mission brief from Lieutenant Armstrong and a trip to the armory Vilan found himself loaded down with gear. He was in full battle rattle with full assault pack and 200 rounds for his assault rifle. Then he had several belts of ammo for Fox's LMG stuffed into his pack and a M41 launcher across his back. The squad found themselves riding in the back of a Pelican listening to Monkey's extremely old music after he

won a game of rock, paper, scissors against Hotshot.

"How do you listen to this crap?" Hotshot demanded as he adjusted the bipod on his rather long rifle.

"It's classic," Monkey explained as he tapped his foot in time with the music.

"What fuck is a bayou?" Hotshot demanded. "And why was he born on one? And what the hell is a Cajun queen?"

"Alright tighten up," Stevens said. "Two minutes till touchdown." Magazines were pulled out of pouches and shoved into weapons as bolts were locked forward. "Easy mission." Stevens said. "So let's do it right and get back to base in time for dinner chow."

"No such thing as an easy mission for rangers Jack," Ghost said.

"Amen," The rest of the rangers said in unison expect for Zimmerman and Vilan. They were jolted in their seats as the Pelican touched down a second later the ramp dropped. The squad rushed out laying down in the knee high grass with shouldered weapons. The Pelican flew off leaving the nine marines stranded.

"Alright wedge formation," Stevens said. "Zimmerman stay by my side for now." The Pelican had dropped them off in an open grassy field and the marines quickly spread out forming a wedge with Steven and Zimmerman behind it in the center. They started the rather long march bending the grass down with each step of their boots. They marched the ten clicks in silence and without incident sweat on all of their foreheads. Once they got into sight of the town Stevens had them drop.

"Hotshot, Monkey move up and see what you can see," Stevens ordered.

"Roger," Monkey said as he and Hotshot crawled through the grass. They crawled a short distance to a better vantage point where Hotshot set up his rifle and peered through the scope. The rest of the squad was left laying in the grass, sweat dripping from their faces waiting on Hotshot's report. Vilan lay next to Fox since he had most of her ammo and took a drink of his canteen the cool water feeling amazing as it flowed down his dry throat. He then looked over to Fox to see her unending her canteen trying to get just a little more water out of it. She had drank more on the march there due to the heavy machinegun she carried.

"Fox," Vilan said extending his half full canteen towards her. She gave him another death glare before she snatched from his hand and finished it off.

"Thanks," She mumbled when she handed it back to him empty.

"Do not mention it," Vilan said as he placed the canteen back on his belt.

"Alright Jack," Hotshot said via radio. "The town looks abandoned, no civilians or Covenant looks like a free lunch."

"Understood," Stevens said as he got to his feet. He reached out and took the handset from the radio that Zimmerman wore on his back. "Command this Sidewinder we have reached objective and proceeding to recon on foot. Over."

"Understood Sidewinder," The voice on the radio said. "Proceed with the mission. Out." Stevens hung up the handset back onto Zimmerman's radio.

"Alright wedge let's move," Stevens said everyone else getting to their feet. They reached the town shortly afterwards. To call it a town was an over statement it was just a refinery that a few basic stores and business had sprung up around with a single diner. There were houses for the workers and their families both shifts and streets to connect everything. They reached the refinery where they finally stopped just inside the gates unsure of what to do next. Stevens whistled sharply before pointing at Hotshot and Monkey then pointed at high platform that went around one of tall smoke stacks. Monkey and Hotshot nodded just before they started climbing the ladder to reach the platform.

"Zimmerman, Raptor, Ghost check out the main office," Stevens ordered. "Hawk and I are going to check the storage tanks. Fox and Jones stay here and cover the main gate." With that everyone went to complete their tasks. That left Fox and Vilan standing behind a cluster of 55 gallon drums. Fox had her LMG's bipod on the drums, stock pressed into her shoulder as Vilan aimed his rifle loosely at gate. It was going to be an awkward silence till Vilan spoke.

"I truly sorry," Vilan said.

"What?" Fox asked.

"My first day here," Vilan explained. "When...will you remember. It was truly a mistake. I did not know much of human culture, I still do not. All I really knew was entirely male warrior training. I was unfamiliar with the symbols on the doors. It really was a mistake."

"Oh," Fox said. "I thought you were just another private straight out of basic trying to get off."

"Off of what?" Vilan asked confused.

"Never mind," Fox said her face reddening ever so slightly. Vilan was still confused but didn't want to undo any progress the two had made in the last moment. They were saved from another long moment of awkward silence by Hotshot who spoke to them all via radio.

"Hey Jack we have an enemy patrol about 5 clicks out heading our way," He reported his voice a little too calm and a little too icy. "Five Elites, roughly 10 to 13 Jackals and 20 to 25 Grunts. Marching in standard two column formation, my guess is they'll hit main street in 20 mikes. Please advise over."

"Hotshot, Monkey hold your current position," Stevens ordered over the radio. "Everyone else regroup at the main gate near Fox and Jones. Out."

"Roger," Ghost said on behalf of his team over the radio. After a few

moments all the rangers, except Hotshot and Monkey, were near the barrels Fox and Vilan had been using as a barricade. Stevens had been hard at work using a piece of white chalk to draw on top of one of the barrels.

"Alright," He said once he had finished as he keyed his radio so Hotshot and Monkey could hear as well. "Standard four sided complex ambush." Stevens explained pointing at the drawing where there were large squares that represented building, Xs that represented the rangers and Os that stood for the Covenant. "Since they'll be walking down main street most likely heading for the refinery Hotshot and Monkey will be the front side of the death box. On my order Hotshot will take out the Elites and start the ambush. Ghost, Zimmerman and Raptor will be in the diner while Hawk and I will be in the bank across the street. We will be on the left and right of the death box. We'll be close so before you start to fire everyone throw at least one grenade understood?"

"You got it," Raptor said.

"Alright," Stevens said pleased. "Jones and Fox will be in the fuel station at the edge of the town." Stevens said pointed to a square drawn in white chalk with FS on it. "You are to let the enemy patrol pass your position. Then once they are pass you move out and take up a position behind the vehicle here." Stevens pointed to a small square that was close to the fuel station but more in the middle of main street. "Once Hotshot takes out the Elites, Fox go full auto with the LMG don't give them anywhere to go but in the middle of the death box. Remember all positions stay hidden and don't fire till after Hotshot takes out the Elites. Any questions?"

"Yeah," Hawk said. "How come we don't just call in a fire mission on them before they even get to the town?"

"A valid point," Stevens said. "But they are marching through an open field so they could spread out very quickly and it would become very wasteful to use a 155mm shell to kill a single Grunt. Then before we do kill them all they could call for reinforcements or air support and then we'd have a real fight on our hands."

"Fair enough," Hawk said.

"Any other questions?" Stevens asked.

"Yeah I've got one," Monkey said via radio. "What the hell am I supposed to do all the way up here?"

"Spot for Hotshot," Stevens explained. "Also if the shit really hits the fan you'll need to sight them in for a strike and relay the coordinates to Zimmerman for a fire mission. Alright you know what you supposed to do ETA of enemy patrol is 14 mikes I want everyone in position in eight. Let's move." Fox picked up her LMG and started to jog down main street with Vilan right behind her carrying the extra ammo on his back. They were only halfway down the street when Stevens, Hawk, Raptor, Ghost and Zimmerman were already in their positions. They made it to fuel station, ran past the fuel pumps and made it inside of the convenience store. They quickly moved behind the counter and couched down Vilan having to kneel due to his height.

"This is Fox we're set over," She said into her helmet mike.

"Roger that," Stevens said over the radio. "Patrol is still about 6 miles out so hold tight. Only move once they are past your position. Over."

"Will do out," Fox said and then turned to give Vilan a thumbs up and a genuine smile. Vilan returned the thumbs up (the best he could) and even twisted his mandibles into a grin. Fox was happy that she was about to fuck up some poor Covenant bastard's day while Vilan was just happy that she wasn't glaring at him. Fox reached up and pulled a candy bar from one of the shelves that were behind the counter. She opened it and started to eat when she saw that Vilan was staring at her. "You want one?" She asked.

"No thank you," Vilan said. Fox shrugged and went back to eating the candy bar. Vilan watched her eat for a few more moments as he tried to think of something to say to her. On his home planet he had heard while he was in school that finding and getting the attention of a mate was both difficult and confusing. He had never been brave enough to try since he was always looked down on as a half breed being part human. Then no one had taught him how to impress a human female and he really wished he knew more of human culture than basic training and that one brief encounter with the two female marines.

"Fox," Vilan said after he thought he had something worked out. She turned and looked at Vilan expectantly her hazel eyes meeting his blue (a gift from his father) and he found himself unable to speak. He was saved by Sergeant Stevens who spoke to them over the radio.

"Jones, Fox enemy patrol nearing your position," Stevens said. "Monkey will advise when you're clear to move to second position. Maintain radio silence but acknowledge over." Fox reached up and keyed her radio twice in quick succession to let Stevens know she had heard him. "Roger that," Stevens said after she did that. "Hunker down till they pass out." Vilan and Fox ducked down completely behind the counter just as they could hear feet marching on pavement. As they got closer they could hear equipment swinging and rattling on harnesses. They could also hear the deep breathing the Grunts did in order to pull the methane from their tanks along with the crippling the Jackals made. The sounds got louder and soon the two hiding rangers could see their shadows play across the back shelves of the store as they walked by it. Vilan's heart was beating in his chest, not that he was scared but excited that he would soon be killing more of the enemy that had killed his father. Soon no more shadows passed and the noise slowly started to fade as they got farther away. Then once they couldn't hear them anymore did Vilan and Fox peek over the counter.

"Alright," Monkey said in both their ears via radio. "You're clear to move to second position but keep your heads down and move silently over." Fox keyed her radio twice again to let Monkey know she understood. She then picked up the LMG and moved out from behind the counter and made her way over to the door Vilan right behind her. She slowly pulled open the door and stuck her head out to check on the enemy's location. She then stepped out and motioned to Vilan to follow and they both walked out onto main street. They jogged in a half crouch to the vehicle which was a car parked at an odd angle clearly left in a hurry. As Vilan jogged carefully so his boots didn't make

much noise he couldn't help but think of the night he and Zimmerman went after Decker. They reached the car and Fox set the LMG up on the hood pointing to Vilan and then lightly tapping the feed tray the sign for ammo. Vilan nodded, opened his pack, pulled out a belt and linked it to the end of the one that was already in Fox's LMG.

That complete he jogged to the other end of the car resting his assault rifle on the trunk. He then took two magazines from their pouches on his vest and placed them on the trunk as well so he could reload in a hurry. Vilan flipped his rifle from safe to auto and took a deep breath to steady his nerves. He eyed the enemy patrol carefully his own kind easy to pick out as they marched. Hotshot had been right there were five Elites two marching in front, one in the middle and the least two at the rear of the formation. Seeing them march, shoulders rolled back and heads held high filled Vilan with a dull rage. One that if it hadn't been for the discipline he had received in basic would have caused him to charge at them with a roar. Instead he took solace in the fact that very soon they would all be dead and they didn't even know it.

"Alright Fox and Jones in position," Monkey said via the radio they were all able to hear him but he was speaking to Stevens. "We're all cocked, locked and ready to rock over."

"Understood," Stevens said. "Let them just get a little closer then we'll nail the coffin shut. Over." Vilan counted ten of his heartbeats and then on the 11th the middle of the enemy formation had reached the diner and bank. Stevens spoke again. "Now Hotshot."

"Alright kids pay attention and watch daddy work," Hotshot said in that icy voice of his that had replaced his normally upbeat and sarcastic one. The front Elite's head suddenly exploded, purple blood and brain exploding out the back. Before the blood had even hit the ground the second front Elite's head snapped back blood spraying from it as well. The sound of the first shot was just starting to echo around the buildings when the middle Elite's head blossomed blood followed very quickly by the last two Elites in the rear. The first Elite's body was still falling to the ground hadn't even made it halfway and all the Elites were already dead. Hotshot's speed and accuracy were truly impressive. He was able to get five shots off without reloading for he already had a round in the chamber and then a full four round magazine. The bodies of the Elites were still falling leaving the Grunts and Jackals looking around confused when Fox opened up with the LMG.

Rounds slammed into the Grunts' and Jackals' backs and Fox gritted her teeth fighting to keep the machinegun on target. Vilan had opened up as well firing only aiming loosely at the whole of the enemy formation. Not having the ammo capacity of Fox's LMG Vilan's bolt locked back on an empty magazine. He dropped it, grabbed one from the trunk of the car, shoved it home and rode the bolt fired to resume firing. Meanwhile Fox had not let up at all as she swung the barrel in short arcs to cover them all with a hail of bullets. The surviving enemy troops had just started to turn to face Fox and Vilan firing a few wild shots into the air. That's when the five grenades that were thrown by Steven's, Hawk, Raptor, Ghost and Zimmerman went off. Though doubtful anything could have survived that the five rangers poured fire where the enemy formation had been.

"Cease fire! Cease fire!" Stevens shouted over the radio a second later. Vilan immediately stopped firing but Fox still went hero on the LMG unable to hear her radio. Vilan ran over and slapped her on the shoulder and she stopped firing then being the last one to do so. Smoke lazily rolled out and off the end of the barrel and the tip had a slight glow to it. Vilan and Fox both stared down the street at the cloud of smoke that was caused by the grenades and rounds hitting the concrete that had formed where the enemy had been. When it finally settled all they could see was Covenant bodies, blood and body parts. "Good work everyone." Stevens said over the radio. "Regroup at the refinery and-"

INCOMING 6 O'CLOCK HIGH!" Hotshot suddenly shouted Vilan able to hear him through the radio and his voice even from his far away position. Vilan's head whipped around and he was able to see the Banshee that was screaming toward him and Fox. He was able to see the green blob of energy spit from the front of it and reacted faster than any human could. He grabbed Fox picking her up by the waist as he sprinted forward into a nearby alleyway in-between two buildings. They had just made it to the alley when the car they had been taking cover behind exploded in a ball of fire and metal. A second later the Banshee screamed over their heads and Vilan placed Fox on the ground. He pulled the launcher from his back and armed it just like they had taught him in basic training before running back out onto main street. Fox who was still a little dazed could only sit and watch him.

Vilan made it to the middle of the street, shouldered the launcher, pressed his eyes up to the scope and scanned from the Banshee. He found it buzzing around the refinery firing at the smoke stacks trying to find and nail Hotshot and Monkey. He put the sight on the Banshee, pulled and held the first trigger as he tracked the Banshee. A moment later the sight turned red, yellow triangles appeared around the Banshee and Vilan could hear a shrill tone.

"BACK BLAST AREA CLEAR!" Vilan shouted just before he depressed the second trigger. The launcher kicked hard against his shoulder as the rocket exploded from the end of the tube and had he been a human he would have been knocked on his ass. He remained on his feet but he was rocked back on his heels the rocket had already closed half the distance to the Banshee. Vilan had just loaded the launcher from his shoulder so he could see when the rocket slammed into the Banshee as it tried to avoid the rocket. The enemy craft was turned into a fireball and falling debris that was sprinkled over the refinery. There was no time to celebrate for Hotshot spoke again.

"We have three Phantoms closing in on our location at flank speed," Hotshot reported. "I think they're going to try and flank us." Vilan turned and could see the three Phantoms flying in a loose wedge. He re-shouldered the launcher and took aim at the lead one when Fox slapped him on the shoulder and with her other hand shoved the end of the tube.

"You won't be able to destroy one of those with just a single rocket," Fox explained as she pulled Vilan back towards the alley. "And that's the only rocket we got left." Vilan was about to apologize when Hotshot gave an update.

"Looks like one is going to set down near the fuel station, one is going on the west end and the other one the south end of town,"

Hotshot reported. Vilan and Fox were able to see one of the Phantoms slow down and lower itself getting ready to deploy its troops.

"Fox, Jones take the one by you," Stevens ordered speaking quickly. "Ghost your team take the one on the south. Hawk and I well take the last one, Hotshot help whoever needs it lets move people counter their counter attack." Vilan's and Fox's Phantom had just opened its side hatches to deploy its troops after Stevens had finished talking.

"Now fire into the troop compartment!" Fox shouted. Vilan reacted quickly snapping up the launcher and firing the second and last rocket. A pair of Grunts were the only ones that were able to make it out of the troop compartment before the rocket slammed into it and explode. When it did not only did it kill all the Covenant troops inside but damaged internal systems of the Phantom. Secondary explosion blossomed out of the open side hatches and then out of the hull itself as the Phantom rocked in the air. The enemy craft loss propulsion suddenly and fell to the ground crushing the two Grunts who had been spared from the rocket. More explosions ripped the hull apart as the entire craft started to burn.

"Good fucking job," Fox said actually impressed.

"Thank you," Vilan said slinging the empty launcher across his back again. The two rangers heard more assault fire, grenades going off and finally the crack of Hotshot's sniper. Fox was about to radio Stevens to see where they were needed when it all stopped at once a eerie quiet settling over the town.

"Sound off over," Stevens ordered over the radio. Fox keyed her radio.

"Fox and Jones both up," Fox explained. "All our tangos are down over."

"Monkey and Hotshot up," Monkey reported. "All tangos down on the west side over."

"Roger that," Stevens said. "Thanks for that were up over." There was silence then as they waited for Ghost's team to check in but they didn't. "Ghost you have a copy over." Still nothing but silence as Vilan started to have a bad feeling grow in his chest. "Ghost come in damn it! Over."

"I'm here over," It was Raptor who had spoken.

"What's wrong? Report over," Stevens ordered already being able to tell that something was wrong.

"I'm pinned down," Raptor explained. "Zimmerman's wounded and he's being held hostage with Ghost by a couple of Elites over."

"Where are you? Over," Stevens demanded.

"Near a laundromat on the north side of town over," Raptor said her voice becoming frantic as the other rangers could hear plasma fire and the roar of an Elite over the radio.

"Just hang on we're moving to your position now out," Stevens said



not realizing that Vilan had already taken off heading towards Raptor and his wounded friend. He moved at an all out sprint that was far faster than any human could match. He was the first to make it to Raptor and saw her standing beside the door of the laundromat plasma fire flying out of the door making it impossible for her to return fire. He could also see the dead Covenant bodies that littered the parking lot as he ran up and stood next to Raptor.

"Sit rep!" Vilan demanded his voice cold.

"Two Elites have got Ghost and Zimmerman inside and say if we come after them they'll kill them," Raptor said grimly as more plasma fire flew out the door. Vilan looked around wildly trying to come up with an idea when he saw the body of a dead Elite. Vilan ran over to him and picked up his fallen plasma rifle before running back to Raptor the other rangers still nowhere in sight.

"Alright," Vilan said in a voice Raptor was just able to hear. "When I fire this weapon I want you to scream as if you are in pain and then drop your rifle in front of the door."

"What?" Raptor asked.

"Just trust me," Vilan said. "And no matter what happens you stay on the outside. Ready?"

"Yes," Raptor said but was still confused.

"Good," Vilan said just before he fired the plasma rifle at the wall next to Raptor. She reacted beautifully as she gave a yell of convincing pain as she tossed her rifle so it chattered to the ground in front of the opened laundromat door. The plasma fire that had been coming from the door suddenly stopped. "Filthy human." Vilan said loudly in his native tongue but not too loudly.

"Who goes there?" A deep voice from inside the building demanded in Sangheili. "Name and unit."

"Minor Kalmare of the 432nd Shock Legion," Vilan lied using his middle name as his last and the unit of Elite he had taken the weapon from. "Come out bothers it is safe the humans are dispatched."

"All of them?" The voice asked.

"Correct," Vilan lied flicking his eyes to Raptor who's eyes widen in understanding as her helmet's translator worked.

"You are a noble warrior Kalmare," The voice said. "However as field marshal I ordered who to come in here. We still have two humans to take care of."

"Yes of course excellently," Vilan said before he took a deep breath and walked into the building. Raptor who had heard and understood the whole conversation due to her translator went out to grab Vilan but she was too slow. Vilan walked into the building and took the sight in quickly. Standing in front of the door was a red clad major Elite and a gold clad field marshal. Behind them on the floor behind a line of washers were Ghost and Zimmerman. Ghost held a dressing to Zimmerman's arm from which blood was slowly starting to soak through. Upon hearing Vilan enter the two Elites turned to face him and both

of their features changed to confusion.

"What are you wearing Kalmare?" The field marshal asked. Vilan didn't answer he just aimed the plasma rifle that was in his right hand at him while he aimed his assault rifle in his left at the major. A heartbeat later he opened fire with both weapons at the same time hitting the field marshal with blue fire as he hosed the major with full auto fire from his assault rifle. Both Elites' faces changed to one of shock as they tried to react but just as they did their shields over loaded and went dead. Vilan continued to fire until his rifle went dry and the plasma rifle cycled trying to cool itself as it over heated. Vilan dropped the overheated weapon onto the corpse of the field marshal before he reloaded his rifle. He then walked over and helped Zimmerman and Ghost to their feet and out of the building. Raptor quickly took Zimmerman and started treatment of his wound. It was just a nasty graze from a plasma bolt and would be fully healed in a week.

The rest of the rangers had made it over there by then just in time to see Vilan emerge from the building caring both Ghost and Zimmerman. Raptor had filled them in on Vilan's plan and that was why they hadn't gone in after him. Zimmerman was soon on his feet and ready to fight again by the time the Pelican showed up. Since there was both fuel in the refinery's tanks and they had wounded command sent in a bird to pick them up as it dropped off engineers to drain the tanks. The ride back to the FOB was in silence, not even Monkey's radio played, with how chose they had came to losing two rangers.

#### 15. Dead man's armor

Nine marine had formed a loose circle around two dead marines. The two fallen comrades were laying on a gray blanket white cards pinned to the front of their uniforms. The nine marines stared down at them a little unsure of what to do until one of them spoke finely.

"You're going home now," One of them said holding a grenade launcher.

"Semper Fi," The marine standing next to him said holding his rifle over his shoulder.

"You were a mean marine sir," The next marine in line said.

"Go easy bros," A marines said also holding his rifle over his shoulder.

"Better you then me," A marine with a LMG and two belts of ammo that criss-crossed his chest remarked.

"Well at least they died for a good cause," The marine standing next to the LMG gunner said.

"What cause was that?" The LMG gunner asked.

"Freedom," The marine said next to him said.

"Flush out your head new guy," The heavy gunner said still staring at

the two dead marines. "You think we waste 'em for freedom?... This is a slaughter. If I'm going to get my balls blown off for a word, my word is poontang."

Vilan turned to Hotshot who was seating to his right as the two watch the scene unfold before them.

"Did this event actually take place?" Vilan asked Hotshot in a harsh whisper.

"No," Hotshot said quickly as he just wanted to keep watching the movie. After two missions back to back the squad had been giving the day off. They were left to their own devices but when the day started to wind down they all ended up in a barracks to watch a movie. Monkey won the tournament of rock, paper, scissors(he seemed to have an unnatural gift when it came to that game) and got to choose the movie. Like his taste in music his taste in movies were very old but the one he had chosen was a favorite of all the rangers.

"So there was never a Vietnam war?" Vilan asked Hotshot confused now.

"No there was," Hotshot said. "A long time ago."

"Then this did happened," Vilan said pointing at the screen.

"No," Hotshot said as he tried to hear the movie.

"There wasn't a Tet offensive?" Vilan asked.

"There was," Hotshot explained with a sigh. "Look what this movie was about is true but what is happening right now didn't happen. Or...well you know maybe it did somewhere."

"Why would somebody make a film about something that did not happen?" Vilan asked.

"Just shut up and watch the damn movie," Fox ordered. She was seating next to Vilan on his left and could hear him as he talked to Hotshot. Vilan immediately fell quiet and turned to watch the movie again. That was when the lights snapped on blinding all of the rangers as their eyes were accustom to the dark room.

"What the hell?" Hotshot demanded as he looked behind him. Standing in the doorway with his hand still on the light switch was Sergeant Stevens. "What's up Jack?"

"I hate to interrupt your movie," Stevens said walking into the room. "But our platoon has QRF tonight from 2300 to 1000 tomorrow. All the rangers groaned to include Vilan and Zimmerman for even they knew what that meant.

"But it's our day off," Ghost protested.

"Well your day off has ended as pre Psycho's orders," Stevens explained.

"Don't tell me he's sergeant of the guard tonight," Monkey said getting to his feet.

"Unfortunately he is," Stevens said with a sigh. Here all the rangers groaned again expect for Vilan and Zimmerman.

"I am not helping that sick bastard make his jerky again," Monkey said. "It's Ghosts turn."

"The fuck it is," Ghost said. "I helped him last time."

"No you were supposed to help him last time," Monkey said. "But hid like you always do and I had to help him...again."

"Look," Stevens said using his thumb and forefinger to rub the bridge of his nose. "I'm going to help him make his fucking jerky. Just suit up in the armory and meet near the ECP by 2230." With that Stevens walked out of the barracks. With mumbles and groans the rest for the rangers headed off to their barracks to don their armor and combat gear. Vilan found himself in front of his footlocker, opened it up, and started to pull out his armor but stopped when he picked up his chest/back plates. For on the center of his chest plate was a newly painted emblem. Vilan held the piece of armor thinking he must have someone else's but the name plate said Jones so it must be his. Vilan was so busy staring at the emblem he didn't see or hear Ghost approach.

"You like it?" Ghost asked.

"You did this?" Vilan asked nodding at the emblem.

"Yeah do you like it?" Ghost asked again.

"Indeed," Vilan said as he stared at the emblem closer. It was done up neatly in white paint. It was a large shield and set on top of it where two crossed swords. But the most interesting part of it that in the middle of the crossed swords was the skull of a Sangheili. The skull had a cracked mandible and there was a hole near the top supposed to be from a bullet. "Why did you do this for me?"

"To thank you for saving me life," Ghost said. "I know it's not much but it's what I'm good at."

"How did you come up with this design?" Vilan asked lighting brushing it with his fingers.

"I don't know," Ghost admitted rubbing the back of his head. "It just popped in my head and I don't know it just felt...right you know."

"I see," Vilan said strapping the armor on. "And thank you."

"No problem," Ghost said turning to walk away. "If you save my hid again I might just have to start working on my laser rifle again."

"Laser rifle?" Vilan asked intrigued now as he strapped on the rest of his armor.

"Please don't encourage him," Monkey said stepping beside Vilan already in full battle rattle weapon in hand. "The bastards got it in his head he came turn the Spartan Laser into a lighter, faster firing, longer lasting weapon. However he can't get it into his thick

head that the reason the Spartan Laser is so big is because of its power source. He tinkered with the idea for months. Three gutted Spartan Lasers, four prototypes and five 'miss fire'; accident later the: Ghost mark five laser rifle was born. I do have to give the bastard credit for it was about the size of a DMR."

"And it fucking worked to," Ghost called from across the barracks also in full battle rattle now.

"Yeah for one short burst," Monkey snorted. "Then it melted in your fucking hands."

"Hey if I would have been given more time to work on a cooling system for it," Ghost said. "I have a pretty good idea to. Instead of ammo for the laser itself the ammo would be for the cooling system so then-"

"But Buzzsaw found out what he was working on," Monkey said cutting Ghost off. "He was pissed when he and Ghost had to explain to a major that he had dismantled three very expensive Spartan Lasers."

"It would have worked and been awesome," Ghost mumbled as he walked out of the barracks. Vilan now in full battle rattle himself and rifle at the lower ready walked out joining the rest of the rangers. Once they were all outside the started to walk subconsciously moving into a formation as they moved towards the ECP. When they got their they found Sergeant Stevens leaning against a parked Warthog.

"Alright listen up for assignment," Stevens said reading from a clipboard. "Raptor, Fox roaming guard. Hotshot, Bones tower guards: Tower D4."

"Who is Bones?" Vilan asked confused since it was close to his last name but not quite it.

"You are," Stevens explained pointing at Vilan. "Monkey came up with it." Not only did Vilan earn his emblem but his nickname as well. "Alright: Hawk, Ghost and Zen ECP." And it seemed Zimmerman did as well. "As for me I'm in the 'Hog with Psycho for mounted patrol. Let get to it." They all turned heading to their different posts when Stevens spoken again. "Oh hey Bones I almost forgot." Stevens handed Vilan an envelope with his name on it. "This came for you today."

"Thank you," Vilan said accepting the envelope and jogging to catch up with Hotshot. Vilan followed Hotshot to the foot of a guard tower which two other marines were climbing down from. Once they were down the two exchanged nods with Hotshot and Vilan before they climbed the ladder. Once at the top and inside the tower Hotshot set up his weapon's bipod on the tower's railing. He peered into its scope and into the dark night beyond the FOB's fence.

"Might as well settle in for the long haul," Hotshot remarked. "You can take it easy for the first hour then we can switch."

"Are you sure?" Vilan asked.

"Yeah," Hotshot said. "Take a nap or jack off just don't let me see or hear you."

"Jack off?" Vilan asked confused.

"Boy you really are innocent aren't you," Hotshot remarked. "Never mind just enjoy your break." Vilan nodded before sitting on the tower floor resting his back against the chest high wall. He pulled the envelope and opened it to pull the letter out from the inside. It was a letter and it wasn't from his mother like he thought it would have been. Instead it was from Private Stone from basic training. Vilan started to read the rather long looking letter using only the moon light.

\_Hey Jones, \_

\_ What's up man(or Sangheili) it's Private Stone from basic, Reapers lead the way. Anyway I saw your mug on a news vid the other day giving out your current duty station. It seems an Elite fighting for humans is kind of a big deal. Of course I told everyone I went to basic with ya but few believe me. I just wanted to write you to see how you're doing since you're one of the few privates I respected greatly out of basic training. I hope your campaign is going better then the 343rd's. From day one I have been on the front lines and the entire time we have been under constant Covenant attack. It just depends on what their throwing at us at the current time.\_

\_ My squad is a pretty good and I like all the guys but I miss the fuck out of you and Zimmerman. I'm glad you two got to go together but like I said I do mis-\_ The ground rumbled shaking the bunker Private Stone and his platoon were in. It also dislodged some dirt from the ceiling and caused it to land on the piece of paper Stone was writing the letter to Vilan on. It was impossible for Stone to tell the difference between incoming and outgoing rounds anymore. Either way both enemy and friendly shells were always landing it was just the last one was closer to the bunker.

"Shit," Stone said as he used a glove hand to wipe the dirt off. He was about to continue writing when Sergeant Keiling entered the bunker. His face was covered in dirt and grime so was his uniform

"Alright," Keiling said. "Our breaks over. Time to get back to the front." Sighing heavily Stone set the unfinished letter down knowing he was going to have to finish it later. He slowly got to his feet standing up from the bunk he was seating on his entire body sore. He was covered in dirt, grime, dried sweat and blood(both human and alien) like Kelling and the rest of his platoon. The only part that wasn't was his forehead where his helmet covered. Stone strapped his helmet back on before picking up his assault rifle. The platoon slowly started to file out of the bunker none wanting to leave. They had been on the front for two weeks fighting the entire time and they were battle weary. It wasn't just that, that caused their morale to sink it was the fact they were fighting a losing battle. Three times the humans had been pushed back forced to abandon their lines and pull back to a secondary one. But now there was nowhere left for them to run they were at their last line before their FOB.

Stone walked out of the bunker and into the trenches the sound of incoming and outgoing artillery rounds becoming much louder. The soft pops and chatter of distance small arms fire could be heard as well, along with the high pitched whine of plasma weapons. They passed

other just as dirty and battle weary marines as they sat in machinegun nests, mortar pits, or dug outs. Lucky the Covenant weren't attacking them there both to Stone's and the marines' entrenched there satisfaction. As Stone's platoon moved through the trench, ducking their heads slightly to keep them out of sight, the marines entrenched there gave them a look filled with pity. They knew they were going back to the front and felt bad for them but at the same time were glad it wasn't them. All the companies have served some time on the front however it was that the 343rd seemed to get the blunt of it.

A cry of pain followed closely by moans filled with pain caused Stone to look over to a bunker's entrance as they slowly filed by. The bunker was being used as the aid station and Stone could see all the wounded marines laying on cots. The dirt floor was stained red with blood as the medics worked to keep them alive and ease their pain. The walking wounded were patched up and sent back to the line as the more serious injured were left there to wait for evac. Stone watched as a medic with rolled up sleeves, black rimmed eyes and blood stained forearms walked out of the bunker to stand in the trench. He placed a cigarette in his mouth and lit it the blood on his fingers staining the white paper of the cigarette. Stone looked forward just in time to see two marines running towards the bunker carrying a third marine between them. The third one's head was covered in blood hanging lifelessly and his left leg was missing just below his knee.

"Medic!" One of them shouted as they neared the bunker passing Stone. The smoking medic throw down his unfinished cigarette and gestured for the marines to bring the wounded one inside. All four marines disappeared into the bunker just as two medics carried a marine out. One medic cared him under the arms the other held him by the legs his butt sagging and his arms dragging along the ground. The marine's skin that was being cared was very pale and his uniform and armor were stained in blood. It was obvious that the marine was dead as the two medics cared him to a dugout next to the bunker. They laid him down in a line next to all the other dead marines. Stone did a quick count in his head, there had to be company in an half worth of dead marines and those were just the ones that had been killed today. Once they had set him down the medics started to remove his armor, inspect it to see if it was salvageable and then tossed into piles of equally bloody and dented armor. It was cold and a little disrespectful to just strip a fallen marine of his armor. However other that got wounded but could still fight would need new armor to replace their damaged pieces and they couldn't wait on supply to send them new pieces. Stone's chest plate and right shoulder were dead man's armor itself.

Stone turned to look forward again following the marine in front of him as they moved through the trenches. They moved through the maze like trenches passing other marines and fortifications all dirty all battle worn. Suddenly a Banshee screamed over head causing the marines that heard it to look up. They watched it fly by over head and the missile that was fired from the automated batteries chase it. They didn't see the explosion but they heard it. Soon Stone and his platoon had made it to a dugout next to a section of trench that two machinegun nest sat in pointing down the trench. The last point before they entered the front line's main battle trench. The sounds of battle were much louder now as they could even hear the yells and screams of fellow marines and shouts of the Covenant.

"Alright," Keiling said letting his eyes sweep over the marines' blood shot and tired eyes. "We've all been through this before. Fire in short bursts and then duck back down, reload only when taking cover, grenades if they get too close, engage the closest targets first and call for artillery on enemy armor and clusters. Everyone ready?" The answer was no but they shook their heads yes anyway. "Alright first squad into the trench moving to section delta. Go! Go! Go!" The marines of first squad ran in-between the machinegun nest and into the trench. They ran in a half crouch rifles pulled close to their chests. As they moved plasma rounds started flying over their heads as the enemy started to notice them. Soon they disappeared around a corner and were lost from sight. A minute passed before Keiling spoke again. "Ok second squad into the trench, move to section Charlie. Go! Go! Go!"

Stone was a part of second squad and ran into the trench moving in a crouch. He ran his boots leaving deep impressions in the dirt that made up the floor of the trench. He could hear the crack of shots, thunder of explosions and cries of pain and anger. He tuned them out however as he focused on his breathing as he ran to keep up with the marine in front of him. As he ran he wished Vilan was there with him, he had always felt that with him they couldn't lose. The bastard was just so tough and never gave up, what sacred Stone was that's who they were fighting now expect they had shields and better weapons. Stone's squad made it to a section of trench for which a wooden sign marked as 'C'. They stopped and turned to face a wall of the trench that a step had been made out of dirt alone. The marines ran up and stood on it so when they were at their full height their head and shoulders would be just above the trench so they could fire at targets.

Stone popped up and sighted his first target a Grunt at 200 meters. Stone shouldered his rifle and fired at it just long enough to knock it on its ass before ducking back into the trench. Plasma and needle rounds passed over his head as he ducked down. Stone watched as the fire started to slack and then switch from his area to another as they fired at other marine in the trench. Stone popped up again and fired on a Jackal that was only 170 meters out caught between cover. However most of Stone's rounds hit his shield with only one actually grazing the Jackal. The Jackal turned to face Stone his plasma pistol overcharging in his hands. Stone's eyes widen as he ducked back down into the trench just as the glowing green glob of plasma struck the ground just in front of Stone. When it did it showered Stone with very warm dirt smudging his goggles. He used a gloved hand to try and wipe the dirt off of them but all he really did was smear it around. Stone pulled a grenade from his belt and peeked his head up to check his target. The Jackal was closer now moving at a slow determined pace ducking behind his shield. A small group of Grunts had joined him firing at the trench to cover him.

Stone pulled the pin on the grenade before popping up and looping it as hard as he could at the Jackal and Grunts before ducking back down. He was a little short the grenade landing a little in front of the Jackal. It didn't matter for when it went off it knocked the bastard back filling his body with shrapnel and killing one other Grunt. The remaining Grunts turned and ran fearing for their lives and were easily picked off by other marines. With the close targets taken care of Stone scanned for more only seeing a main Covenant assault force a little under a 1000 meters out. An entire battalion



worth of Grunts, Jackals, Elites and even a few Hunters mixed in were marching towards Stone and his squad's section of trench. In front of them were six Wraiths who's cannons glowed blue before they sent a volley towards the marines. The range was too great still and their plasma blobs landed in front of the trench a safe distance away.

That didn't stop the Covenant troops behind the Wraiths from firing however as the air was filled with plasma and energy rounds all aimed at the marines. The range was so great that most rounds flew over the marines' heads or hit the ground in front of them. The marines fired back as well but they also didn't hit much but the thick armor of the Wraiths or the occasional Grunt that got too overzealous and rushed out ahead of the Wraiths. This left the two sides exchanging pop shots the marines holding their position as the Covenants closed in just waiting for the Wraiths to get into range. Stone saw this and could see other groups of the Covenant forces move towards other sections of trench that Stone's platoon occupied.

"Sparky!" Stone shouted as he ducked down to reload. "Sparky!" A rather skinny marine wearing a long range radio on his back ran hunched over and knelt next to Stone.

"What can I do for you?!" Sparky asked over the sounds of battle.

"Get some fucking fire on those bastards before they level us!" Stone shouted as he jumped back up to fire(pointlessly) at the steadily advancing Covenant forces. Sparky peeked up to get the coordinates from his HUD for the enemy forces. Once he ducked back down he took the handset from the radio's hook and pressed it up to his ear covering his other with his free hand.

"Boomer! Boomer! This Redeye two five over!" Sparky shouted into his radio.

"This is Boomer go ahead Redeye two five over," The voice on the other end said calmly since they were well behind the lines.

"I have a request for an immediate fire mission over!" Sparky shouted. There was a longer pause as the Gun Chief checked his roster to see if he had any pending fire missions.

"Go ahead with fire mission request Redeye two five over," Boomer said after consulting his roster.

"Coordinates as follows!" Sparky said looking up to double check them as a green plasma round wizzed over his head. "Grid Charlie two, four, niner, zero by grid Delta two, three, six, seven! Fire three salvos of fiver! Fire for effect over!"

"Confirmed coordinates: grid Charlie two, four, niner, zero by grid Delta two, three, six, seven. Firing for effect three salvos of five. Over," Boomer said. Sparky slapped Stone on the shoulder as he fired at the Covenant forces to grab his attention. Stone stopped firing, ducked down and looked at Sparky.

"We got heavily ran incoming!" Sparky shouted his mouth inches from Stone's ear. No sooner had he spoken then did the marines of second squad heard the whistle of incoming artillery rounds. So did the

Covenant as they started to run heading towards the marines as the Wraiths spread out so they weren't as clustered. It was too little to late as the first salvo slammed into the enemy forces exploding with a deafening whump and shaking the ground the marines able to feel it. They could see the huge cones of dirt and dust the exploding rounds threw up. They could also see the brightly colored armor the Covenant forces wore as they were threw into the air as well. They was a fiery blue explosion in one of the dust cones as a Wraith exploded. After the fire five shells hit there was a second of delay and then the second salvo of five hit before the dust could completely settle. This was followed closely by the third, the marines holding their fire till the dust, dirt and body parts settled. When it did they saw that four of the Wraiths were destroyed and a good half of the infantry forces were dead the rest scattered.

However they were far from out as the surviving Covenant forces get to their feet as the two remaining Wraiths started forward again. The Covenant forces started to fire at the marines again as they were only 600 meters out now. The marines started to fire as well the steadily closing gap started to make the incoming and outgoing fire of the two side more deadly. A marine let out a scream of pain as a plasma bolt clipped his neck as he fell backwards into the trench. The marine next to him knelt down to check on him, saw that he was dead and stood back up to return fire.

"Hit 'em again!" Stone shouted at Sparky.

"Boomer! Boomer! This is Redeye two five!" Sparky shouted into his radio. "Repeat your last! I say again repeat your last!" Sparky shouted wanting them to fire on the same coordinates the same number of times.

"That's a negative Redeye two five," Boomer said. "Already have other requests for fire missions you're on your own. out."

"Son of a bitch!" Sparky shouted.

"What!?" Stone demanded as he reloaded again.

"We're on our fucking own!" Sparky reported. Stone peeked over the trench again and could see the massed Covenant troops and two wraiths that were going to be in range very soon.

"Back blast area clear!" A marine suddenly shouted just before Stone felt a heat was over him as a rocket exploded out of its launch tube. Stone watched as it hit one of the two remaining Wraiths causing it to explode in blue fire. Well one Wraith left, Stone thought as the troops still sent a hail of plasma and needle fire at them. Stone then watched as a second rocket flew passed them and towards the second Wraith. The pilot of the second one saw the threat and tried to turn to avoid it but the rocket moved in a lazy ark tracking it slamming into its side exploding in a red orange cloud of fire. The Wraith itself didn't explode but sat on the ground smoking and disabled. The hatched popped as the crew bailed out and retracted back to join the rest of the Covenant foot soldiers. Well that takes care of the enemy armor, Stone thought but that still left a whole lot of infantry that were still advancing on them.

"Make a hole!" A marine leading a column of three others behind him shouted. He was carrying a collapsed tripod for a heavily machinegun.

The marine right behind was carrying the actual machinegun and was breathing heavily from the weight. The third marine had a pack on his back loaded down with ammo for the machinegun along with carrying two boxes in each hand. The marines of second squad happily moved out of the way to let them pass. The marine carrying the tripod reached a large dirt shelf with a semicircle of sandbags facing out in front of it. A machinegun nest without the machinegun. He unfolded the tripod and placed it on the shelf locking it in place as the marine carrying the machinegun ran up. With a grunt he lifted it up and placed it on the tripod and started to lock it in place. While the two marines worked on that the one carrying the ammo stopped and placed the boxes next to the machinegun opening them up and pulling the heavily belts of ammo from them. The last marine of the column that wasn't burdened by anything, clearly the sergeant of the machinegun team walked up to Stone and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Sergeant Keiling said you guys could use a little help!" The sergeant shouted his grime caked face breaking out into a grin.

"You're a sight for sore fucking eyes!" Stone said as he watched the gunner lift the machinegun's hatch so the assistant gunner could place an ammo belt on the feed tray. The gunner slammed the hatch closed and pulled the charging handle back letting it snap forward. He gritted his teeth as jammed his thumbs down on the firing studs the gun going full auto. Without the Wraiths to shield them the advancing forces were cut down by the heavily caliber rounds as the gunner sweep his fire in a wide arc. The Covenant forces were not deterred in fact they started to run all out at the marines breaking into a charge. The marines inside the trench started to pour fire on them as well only getting more accurate as they closed the gap. While the Covenant forces' shots still went wild as they ran. Many were cut down but the Elites' shields were allowing them to get closer. They were getting to close however and with only one machinegun the marines couldn't keep up. Soon they would reach the trench.

"Fix bayonets!" Someone shouted. Stone stopped firing to duck down and add the specially designed bayonets to fit on the barrel of his assault rifle. After he had it locked in place Stone stood back up ready to fire again. That when he saw an Elite heading straight for him only 50 meters out. Stone aimed and fired at him on full auto watching as his shields flared but held as he charged him. The Elite let out a roar as he got within 10 feet of Stone as he himself started to yell in kind. Stone's rifle's bolt locked back on an empty magazine just as the Elite's shield went dead. The Elite dove at Stone when reached the edge of the trench. Stone reached up and caught him, most of the Elite's weight on his shoulders as his right arm went up between the Elite's legs. Stone lifted him up and threw him over his shoulders slamming the Elite onto his back on the floor of the trench. Before the Elite could recover his breath Stone stabbed him through the chest with his bayonet and twisted it. Purple blood bubbled from the Elite's mouth as Stone pulled the bayonet out and stabbed him in the neck the lights leaving the Elite's eyes.

Stone pulled his bayonet out of the dead Elite again and was about to reload when a soft thud caused him to look to his right. A Grunt had landed in the trench and raised a plasma pistol meaning to shoot a marine in the back when Stone lashed out with his bayonet hitting the Grunt neck. A mixture of blue blood and methane flowed out the new

hole in his neck as he fell backwards and started to flop around trying to breathe. More Covenant troops started to land in the trench in quick succession. Half the marines started to engage them in hand to hand combat as the other half still fired at the ones that hadn't reached the trench yet. Stone watched in disbelief as an Elite picked up a marine by his throat and literally rip his arm for his socket. Stone started to rush the Elite as he threw the marine as he howled in agony out of the trench. Stone reached the Elite that still had his back to him and he wasted no time driving his bayonet through the bastard's back causing him to cry out in pain and surprise. The Elite fell to his knees and Stone twisted the bayonet slowly, he was able to hear the Elite's bones grind. Stone placed a foot on the Elite's back and kicked him off his bayonet and to the ground.

A suddenly white hot pain hit Stone in the back causing him to grunt and fall forward landing on the body of the Elite he had just killed. He rolled over on his back and turned to face behind him able to see that a Jackal had dropped into the trench and had fired a plasma bolt into his back. The Jackal crouched behind his shield as he overcharged a second shot meaning to finish Stone off. Stone shouldered his rifle and pulled the trigger but nothing happened. That's when he remembered he still hadn't reloaded and waited to die. Instead he watched as Sparky ran up behind the Jackal and fired point blank into its back. It cried out in pain as it fell to the ground discharging the bolt into the air. With the threat down Sparky ran towards Stone just as the fire suddenly stopped an eerie silence falling over their section of trench.

"It's over!" A marine shouted. "We got 'em all." Sparky helped Stone to his feet as he felt a spike of pain in his back. Stone looked around and could see plenty of dead Covenant at the bottom of the trench along with marine bodies. He then looked around and saw that over 2/3 of the squad was dead with only a hand full of marines left alive. Even the machinegun team had suffered losses as only the sergeant remained alive his hands around the machineguns' handles as he had to replace the primary gunner.

"Come one let's get you checked out," Sparky said helping Stone walk heading towards the aid station. As they walked through the trenches a squad worth of marines ran pass them heading for their section of trench they had just left. That marine that said it was over was wrong as they only had beaten the Covenant's first wave as the second was right behind them this one having air support. However Stone was out of the fight for a little bit as Sparky led him into the aid station bunker and sat him on a blood stained empty cot. "Wait here I'll get a medic." Stone just nodded as he looked around in a half daze at all the wounded marines some very severely. An overworked medic rushed over to Stone pulling off his blood soaked gloves and pulling on clean ones.

"Lift your arms above your head," The medic ordered as he undid the straps on Stone's chest/back plate. The medic pulled his damaged armor off and tossed it on the cot Stone able to see the fist sized hole in the back plate. The medic then had Stone remove his uniform jacket. Stone then grunted in pain as the medic touched the wound on his back. "Third degree burn in the small of the back. No exposed bone or spinal damage." The medic reported as he smeared a burn cream on a large gauze pad. The medic pressed the dressing to Stone's wound causing him to grunt in pain and then sigh as it cooled the burn. The medic then used medical tape to keep the dressing applied. "Alright."

The medic said as Stone pulled his jacket back on. "Go get some new armor out back and then head to your assigned bunker. I want you to rest for at least four hours then come back so I can reassess the wound." Stone just nodded as he and Sparky walked out of the bunker. The two looked at each other just before Sparky started to jog heading back to the front as Stone walked up to the pile of chest/back plates. The number of dead had grown as did the piles of dead man's armor.

Stone started to sort through them trying to find one that was his size and in the best condition. Finding one that had a hand print made out of blood on it, he strapped it on and walked back to his bunker. He walked inside and sat down on his bunk picking up the letter he had started to write to Vilan. The battle wasn't over yet but for him, at least for a few hours it was. So he started to write again hoping to get it mailed out before he had to return to the front.

Vilan loved Stone's letter as he finished reading it, all of the battle's events Stone had wrote them in great detail. The letter caused Vilan to feel sorrow in his chest for his fellow fourth platoon recruit. They had made it through basic together and then to find him in such hellish battles seemed almost unfair. He should be the ones out there in the thick of it and Stone should be in the tower, Vilan thought. They may be on two different planets but Vilan felt very close kinship to him since they were both in war zones fighting for their lives. Vilan had forgotten since his only two engagements with the Covenant had been a raid and then an ambush that they were a vastly superior enemy. Stone's letter had made that clear to him.

"Hey," Hotshot said causing Vilan to look up. "You're up." Vilan nodded as he stood up folding up the letter and putting it in his pocket. Vilan moved to stand behind the railing as Hotshot took a seat and closed his eyes. "Wake me if we get attacked." Hotshot yawned. Vilan nodded although Hotshot couldn't see it as he peered into the darkness. Vilan thought of Stone both fearing for his safety and wishing he could be there with him.

## 16. Cough

Zimmerman looked down at the dull green metal box and the clearly visible stamped yellow letters reading the label again. \_Ammunition: 40mm HE round 1000 count. Warning: Box can weigh an excess of 250lbs. Four person lift required. \_He then looked over at the parked truck nearby and it's mostly empty bed, where the boxes were meant to be placed. Zimmerman then looked at the dozens of 40mm ammo boxes stacked in high neat pyramided shaped piles inside the concrete bunker. He turned around to face Fox to see her setting on the top of one of the piles picking at her finger nails. A grunt followed by the sound of ammo shaking inside of a metal container caused Zimmerman to look towards the bunker's door. He watched as Vilan single handedly picked up his sixth box, carried it out of the bunker and stacked it in the back of the truck. Zimmerman continued to stare as Vilan walked back in and picked up seventh box to carry out.

"You know something," Fox said suddenly startling Zimmerman a bit. He turned to look up at her as she looked down on the two privates. "When Jack told me I had this detail of moving the ammo for the Pelicans I was less than thrilled. Then he told me I was getting

Bones to help, I was ok with the detail then. Bones you're doing an outstanding job." Fox called after Vilan as he picked up his eighth box.

"Thank you Fox," Vilan grunted as he walked outside the bunker again.

"You know Zen I haven't seen you do anything," Fox pointed out staring at Zimmerman. "Letting poor Bones do all the work you should be ashamed of yourself." Zimmerman just stared up at her not believing what she just said. Although true he hadn't moved a box yet she hadn't done anything either and it was clear she had no intention to do so.

"Well the box is heavy," Zimmerman explained. "I need some help, it even says four person lift required."

"Well since we do not have four people we can't abide by that anyway," Fox explained still on top of a pile of boxes. "Ghost was suppose to help but the little fucker disappeared like he always does. Anyway look at Bones he's doing fine just by himself, he's already on his tenth box."

"But he's an Elite," Zimmerman protested. "The box should say four person lift or one Elite lift required."

"Are you saying you're not as strong as Bones," Fox asked in mock surprise.

"Yes that is exactly what I'm saying," Zimmerman said. "So if you could help me."

"Sorry no can do," Fox explained. "Someone has to supervise and make sure you're following safety protocol. Now are you just going to stand there and fuck your buddy over letting him do all the work? Or are you going to help him?" Zimmerman sighed before looking over and Vilan as he grunted as he picked up yet another box. What Fox had said had worked, Zimmerman felt guilty for not helping Vilan. He looked down at the box he had been staring at and thought since Vilan was picking them up so easily maybe they weren't so bad. Zimmerman bent over and grabbed the box on either side and tried to jerk it up. He got the box half way up but couldn't get it to go up anymore. Zimmerman grunted and jerked harder getting the box almost to a workable position when he felt something pop in his back.

"Ahhh," Zimmerman cried out as he dropped the box it landing with a heavy thunk. Zimmerman tried to stay on his feet as he pressed his hands to the small of his back to try and relieve some of the pain. A lightning bolt of pain shot up his back then causing him to drop to the floor his hands clamped to his back in pain.

"Ah shit," Fox said as she jumped down off the pile. "Alright where does it hurt?" She asked as she walked over to Zimmerman as he lay on the ground winding in pain.

"My fucking back," Zimmerman grunted through clinched teeth.

"Can you get on your feet?" Fox asked as Vilan walked over after seeing his friend in pain.

"What happened to him?" Vilan asked.

"He hurt his back," Fox explained then to Zimmerman. "Can you get on your feet?"

"Fuck no," Zimmerman grunted as he still held his back.

"Alright, alright just hang on," Fox said as she keyed her helmet mike. "Raptor this is Fox come in over."

"This is Raptor go ahead Fox over," Raptor said via radio after a second pause.

"We have a man down at munitions bunker Golf two three," Fox said in to her helmet mike casting a glance at Zimmerman. "Complains of back pain, patent will be liter bound over."

"Roger that," Raptor said a little concern entering her voice. "I'll be there in five with a liter team. It is essential that you do not touch or move the patent. Make sure the patent understands that they shouldn't move either over."

"Understood will do out," Fox said before turning to Zimmerman. "Just hang in there Zen and don't move."

"Will he recover?" Vilan asked concern for his friend's well being evident in his voice and eyes.

"He'll be fine," Fox reassured. "Probably just pulled something. A day or two bed rest and he'll be right as rain."

"I highly fucking doubt it," Zimmerman grunted still on the ground and in pain.

"Raptor is a very good medic," Fox said looking down on Zimmerman. "She'll take care of you."

"You beat your ass I will," Raptor said as she walked into the bunker startling both Vilan and Zimmerman but Fox was un-pushed.

"I understood you would be here in five minutes," Vilan remarked as she neared the group.

"That's when my liter team will be here," Raptor explained as she knelt down beside Zimmerman removing a pack from her back. "I came as quickly as I could to help poor Zen here."

"What the fuck took you so long?" Zimmerman asked teeth clinched in pain surprised she got there so quickly but couldn't resist poking fun at her.

"I told you once before," Raptor explained as she opened the pack and dug inside. "The louder you scream the faster I come. You should've screamed louder." Despite the amount of pain Zimmerman felt he still bushed as Raptor gazed into his eyes.

"I'll keep that in mind the next time I get hurt," Zimmerman grunted.

"You know," Raptor said as she pulled out a syringe filled with a

liquid and flicked it a few times with her middle finger. "If you wanted to see me you could just visit. You don't have to keep hurting yourself." Zimmerman's blush deepened then as Raptor smiled warmly. She then used an alcohol pad to swap the crock of his elbow before injected the syringe into it.

"Ahh," Zimmerman sighed as he felt the pain in his back subside a little allowing him to remove his hands.

"That was a muscle relaxant," Raptor explained as she pulled out another syringe. "This is a pain killer you should feel better almost instantly." She injected it into his arm in the same place and this time Zimmerman breathed out in relief as the pain slowly melted out of his back.

"Thanks doc," Zimmerman said as he was about to get to his feet when Raptor quickly pushed him back down.

"Don't fucking move," A little anger entering her usually kind and gentle tone. "I just eased the pain. Your back could still be fucked up and if you move you're just going to fuck it up more. Don't move till the liter team gets here and then when they do still don't fucking move. In fact don't move till after I complete my exam once we get you back to the field hospital."

"Alright," Zimmerman said sheepishly as he still lay on the ground.

"Good boy," Raptor said as she took Zimmerman's pulse rate from his wrist. "So how'd you hurt your back in the first place?"

"He tried to He-man one of the ammo boxes for the Pelicans," Fox explained for him crossing her arms.

"Oh Zimmerman," Raptor said disappointed. "You're not that strong. The box even says four person lift required."

"I told him that very same thing but he didn't listen," Fox said with a shake of her head. Zimmerman gazed up at the two females unbelieving. He kept switching his eyes from the stone face of Fox to the compassion filled eyes of Raptor not knowing what to say.

"Well Bones was lifting them all by himself," Zimmerman protested after a few seconds of thinking.

"He's an Elite though," Raptor explained. "The box should say four person or one Elite lift required." Zimmerman's mouth hung open then as he couldn't believe that not only was everything he discussed with Fox was coming up again but it was biting him in the ass. Before Zimmerman could respond two burly medics carrying a stretcher between them walked into the bunker and made a bee line for Zimmerman. They knelt placing the stretcher right next to Zimmerman. They then gently rolled him a little onto his side and slipped the stretcher under him. Once they had him on the stretcher they strapped him down to make sure he wouldn't fall or move and possibly injure his back more. Once that was complete the two medics picked the stretcher up and carried him out of the bunker with Raptor in toe.

"Alright," Fox said loudly getting Vilan to stare at her instead of the bunker door where the four marines had left from. "Let's get back



to work."

"Are you certain he will recover?" Vilan asked Fox again.

"Trust me," Fox said as she stared up into his blue eyes. "He'll be just fine."

"I trust you," Vilan said staring into her hazel eyes. The two kept staring at each other for much longer then necessary. To the point where Vilan was going to say something maybe even try to say how he felt about her but Fox beat him to it.

"Alright quit stalling," Fox said with an awkward chuckle. "Back to work."

"My apologies," Vilan said turning back around and walking over to the box Zimmerman had dropped. He bent over and picked it up his back facing Fox. As he did so she could help but glance at his ass as he bent over and then stare at his flexed muscles that his rolled up sleeves clung to as he picked the box up. The trance was broken for her once he stood back up and started to walk out carrying the box to the truck. Fox quickly shook her head to clear it.

"What am I thinking?" She whispered to herself as she climbed back up to her perch. "You know what happened last time you fell for a marine." She scolded herself as she sat back on top of the boxes. Still she found herself glancing at Vilan's butt or muscles again as she watched him work.

As Vilan busted his ass while Fox watched Zimmerman sat on the exam table in a almost bare room in the large prefab building that was serving as the FOB's field hospital. They had taken x-rays of his back and then dumped him in here. Raptor then told him not move, at all, as she went to check on the status of his x-rays. This left him very little to do as he waited for her to return except wonder if the pain would come back. He really hoped it wouldn't and if it did she would be back to give him something for it. Suddenly the door to his room opened startling him and rousing him from his thoughts. Raptor walked holding a file, shut the door again, and walked over to a corner where there was a piece of glass with a light behind it. She still didn't say a word as she stuck his x-rays on top of the glass to examine them. Zimmerman stared at her waiting while she just stared at the x-rays her back to Zimmerman.

"Well," Raptor said suddenly. "I it looks like nothing is broken or slipped out of place."

"That's good," Zimmerman said relief flooding his voice. "Right?"

"More than likely yes," Raptor explained turning to face Zimmerman. "However there are just a few more tests I want to do to rule out some of the more serious causes before I make my diagnosis."

"Alright what do you need me to do?" Zimmerman asked happy something wasn't broken in his back.

"Strip," Raptor said simply. Zimmerman continued to stare at her thinking it was a joke. Once he saw that it wasn't he gave a shrug

and bent down to unlace his boots. Once he took them off he unbuttoned his uniform jacket before taking it off. He folded it neatly and placed it next to him on the exam table. He took of his under shirt next followed by his pants both of which got folded just as neatly and placed on top of his jacket. Zimmerman now stood in front of the exam table wearing only his socks, underwear and dog tags. He saw Raptor just staring at him and coughed a little as he started to feel a little awkward as he waited for her to say something. "All the way." Raptor ordered pointing at his underwear.

"What?" Zimmerman asked his face starting to burn slightly.

"Your underwear," Raptor explained. "Loose them." Zimmerman's face turned even redder at that. Sure he had to get completely nude for a doctor's exam before, one of the times was for his enlistment, but the doctors had all been male.

"But you're a woman," Zimmerman said sheepishly rubbing the back of his head as he stared at the ground his face burning.

"Oh am I," Raptor said in mock surprise. "Thank god otherwise I have been wearing the wrong underwear for my entire life." Zimmerman's blush only deepened as he couldn't help but picture Raptor in her underwear then and how good she would look. "Oi Zen." Raptor said loudly getting Zimmerman to snap his head back up and stare at her. "Take off your underwear. The quicker you do the quicker you can put them back on." Zimmerman gulped as he gripped his underwear and slowly slide them off not wanting to look at her. Once they were at his feet he stepped forward and out of them. He continued to stare at the ground praying that he wouldn't suddenly get aroused and make this awkward situation even more awkward.

"See that wasn't so bad," Raptor said causing him to look up again and she approached him. Zimmerman's face somehow got redder as she got within arm's reach of him. "Relax."

"That's impossible," Zimmerman said barely above a whisper.

"It's ok I'm not just a combat medic," Raptor explained as she stepped even closer so their faces were inches apart. "I'm an actual doctor as well. Now look over there." She said pointing. Zimmerman turned his head to the right to stare at the wall where she was pointing. He was all too happy to not stare at her beautiful face that was so close to his in fear of what might happen to him down there. He wondered what she was going to do being so close to him when he felt her small smooth skinned hand grab his limp penis. Zimmerman's breath catch in his chest and all the spit dried up from his mouth instantly. "Cough." Raptor ordered. Zimmerman didn't cough, he couldn't cough, he didn't even know what a cough was anymore. All he could think about was the very attractive looking woman grabbing his penis in kind of a painful way and not to get an erection. He knew his face must be burning red and he could only image how he must look to her right then: face red, eyes wide, mouth agape.

"Cough," Raptor said calmly her hand still holding his member tightly. Zimmerman wanted to tell her that he didn't know how to but all that came out of his dry mouth and throat were a series of grunts and squeaks. However lucky for Zimmerman the last sound to come out of his mouth was a cough. "Good," Raptor said releasing him and

backing up. "You don't have a hernia." Zimmerman didn't hear her he couldn't he was trying so hard not to fall over as he knee grew weak. He couldn't believe that a woman, a hot one at that, had just touched him down there and he had frozen up like that. Maybe if she would have warned me, Zimmerman thought. However if she did there was no way he would have let her do it or that he wouldn't have gotten an erection for just thinking about her touching him.

"Hey Zen," Raptor said causing him to snap out of his thoughts and look at her as she wrote on her file.

"Hm?" Zimmerman said still unable to form words.

"You can get dressed now," Raptor said. Zimmerman remembered he was naked then and his blush that was starting to subside returned in full force. He scrambled to pull his underwear on followed quickly by his pants. Then once he had he shirt on his heart rate started to come down and blush started to subside again. "Ok." Raptor said getting him to turn around as he buttoned up his uniform jacket. "So you just strained something in your back." Raptor explained. "Since you're young a few days bed rest and a week of light duty should get you right back to normal." She handed him a small piece of paper with something written on it. "I am prescribing you a muscle relaxant I want you to take before you go to bed. A pain killer to take only when and if the pain becomes unbearable and a sleeping aid. I want you to take that right before you go to sleep as well so you're not tossing and turning in your sleep."

"Uhm thanks," Zimmerman said as he managed to find his voice.

"Take that paper to the front desk and they'll give you the meds," Raptor explained opening the door but remained standing in the exam room. "I want you to go to your bunk and take it easy for the rest of the day that's an order. If any sergeants or officers give you shit show them that note. If they still do tell them to talk to me and I'll straighten them out of you. Also I want you to come back in and see me in a week for a reevaluation."

"Thanks again," Zimmerman said not knowing what he should say.

"Now that doesn't mean you can't come see me sooner you know," She said as she walked out, the door shutting behind her cutting off any reply Zimmerman could have had. He didn't have one anyway. He walked out and headed to the front to get his meds wishing she had given him something for the confusion he had in his head then.

Meanwhile back in the munitions bunker Vilan grunted as he loaded the last box onto the truck's bed. He then walked around to the cab on the driver side where he was eye level with the driver even as he sat in the high cab.

"You are loaded," Vilan said panting lightly from the heavy work.

"Alright," The driver said having sat in the cab the entire time his truck was loaded. "Thanks man." Vilan backed away as the driver started the truck, popped it into gear and drove off leaving only a pair of tire tracks and a cloud of black smoke behind. After he watched him go Vilan walked back inside the bunker and looked up at Fox as she still sat on a pile of boxes that didn't need to be

moved.

"Fox the task is complete," Vilan reported happily a little tired from the hard work.

"Outstanding," Fox said as she hopped down from the pile of boxes. "You really made me proud today Bones." Vilan perked up at the compliment.

"Thanks you Fox," Vilan said as he pulled the canteen from his belt. He opened it, threw his head back and upended the canteen over his mouth. Only a few drops of water fell from the canteen and only a few more after Vilan shook it a little. Vilan sighed in disappointment as he recapped it and clipped to his belt again.

"Here," Fox said pulling her own full canteen from her belt. "It's the least you have earned." She explained holding the canteen out so he could grab it.

"Thank you once again Fox," Vilan said as he reached out to grab it. When he did he accidentally placed his claw on top of Fox's hand. He gasped lightly when he felt her surprisingly soft skin in his grasp. She likewise was surprised with how gentle he could be. They stayed like that both staring at their hands holding the canteen for a long moment before Vilan realized what he had done. He was about to remove his hand and Fox was able to feel that in the tiny movements of his hand.

"No don't," Fox said barely above a whisper her usually harsh and mocking voice becoming extremely soothing. The two looked into each other's eyes then and Vilan found her always cold and deadly eyes almost sparkling, full of kindness and wanting. He had liked her eyes very much before but now he couldn't stop looking at them even if he wanted to.

"Fox I," Vilan began his heart pounding in his chest as she stared up at him waiting for him to finish speaking.

"Bones!" A voice suddenly echoed through the bunker causing Vilan and Fox to snap their heads around to face the entrance. Standing there was Sergeant Stevens holding a file. "I have some good news." He said cheerfully as he walked into the bunker heading for the two rangers. His eyes took in at how close they were, the slightest blush on Fox's face and that their hands were touching on the same canteen. "Am I interrupting something?" Stevens asked a knowing smile creeping onto his normally serious face.

"No," Fox spat yanking the canteen and her hand from under Vilan's. She placed the canteen back onto her belt and turned to face Stevens crossing her arms. "What the hell do you want Jack?" Fox demanded her voice back to its normal deadly self.

"Easy," Stevens said backing up for the unusually (more) hostile Fox. "It's not another detail I swear." He then looked around the bunker. "Hey where's Ghost." Vilan stared at Stevens while Fox glared. "Right stupid question. Anyway I came here to give Bones this." Steven said holding up the file.

"What sergeant?" Vilan asked confused.

"To all those that shall see this presents greetings," Stevens said reading from the paper that was attached to the file. "Upon placing special trust in the patriotism, valor, fidelity and abilities in Private Vilan, Kilmare Jones is here by promoted to the rank of Private First Class and charged to the grade of such. All those under him will have to discharge carefully and diligently his lawful orders. He shall also take responsibly for the actions of those under him from the date of his promotion. Sighed Captain Frank Dixon company commander Bravo company 16th, commanding." Stevens lowered the paper a smile on his face. He then held out his hand holding the new rank in it. Vilan reached out and shook his hand accepting the new rank. "Congregation." Stevens said.

"Thanks you sergeant," Vilan said holding the rank at his side having move to the position of attention once he had started to read.

"Hell you've earned it," Stevens said. "In fact I will be sure you get you lance pretty soon as long as you keep up the good work."

"I will sergeant," Vilan reassured.

"Outstanding," Stevens said turning to leave but then stopped. "Oh since everyone has been working so hard, well maybe not Ghost, and with Zen restricted to light duty I put in for passes for everyone. They were approved so the squad is getting its MWR day tomorrow."

"That is great news sergeant," Vilan said not really know what that was as he watched him leave.

"Mandatory fun day," Fox explained for him. "We get to leave post go into town, drink eat and be merry."

"Will you be there?" Vilan asked.

"Of course," Fox said as she continued to leave the bunker.

"Fox," Vilan called after her causing her to stop, turn around and look at him expectantly. Once his eyes met hers he couldn't find the words anymore that were so clearly buzzing around his head before. "Thanks for the water." Even though he hadn't gotten to drink any of it.

"Oh," Fox said a little disappointed. "No problem." She left the bunker leaving Vilan alone with his new rank wishing he had, had the courage to say something.

## 17. On pass

Vilan looked himself over in the mirror that was too short for him having to duck down to be able to see his collar line. The lapile of his uniform jacket lay perfectly flat against his chest and the crossed rifles pinned to them are perfectly on center. Vilan straightens back up as he ran his hands down the front of his uniform jacket to get out the micro wrinkles in it. With that complete he rolled his sleeve so they ended just above his elbows, they had no wrinkles and were the same height and thickness. Vilan then placed his patrol cap on his head and pulled it down so it sat parallel to the marching surface all the way around. He took a step back and

looked himself over in the mirror. His uniform was clean and freshly pressed, the creases thin and sharp, his boots spotless and shining.

His new rank was sown on to his shelve like a professional since Raptor had done it, her time sowing flesh had taught her well. Since Vilan did not possess this skill he had asked her to do it and thanked her saying he would make it up to her anyway he could. He bent down and knocked any specks of dirt that had gathered on his highly polished boots. With himself completely squared away he walked out of the sleeping bay and into the dayroom of the barracks where the rest of the squad had mustered. Despite his dress right dress and uniform appearance he was the one that was sticking out.

Hotshot wore black dress jeans and white V neck cut shirt with a large black eagle on it. Dark sunglasses sat on top of his long hair as a shining necklace hung around his neck. Hawk wore faded blue jeans that were tucked into worn brown boots. He wore a checkered button down long shelve shirt that was tucked into the jeans the shelves rolled back once to expose his wrists. A faded ball cap sat on his head hiding the shinny skin of his shaved head. Monkey wore blue jeans as well, white undershirt with a pack of cigarettes rolled up in the left shelve and leather jacket. Ghost had on old style camouflaged cargo pants, plain t-shirt, and black hoodie with a large white skull painted on the front.

However Vilan barely glance at them for all his attention was on Fox. She wore simple tight jeans that hugged her legs and hips and a white tank top that clung to her figure. She also wore a leather jacket that stopped just a little above her waist. Vilan had thought she looked attractive before but he had never seen her out of uniform and know she looked absolutely stunning to him. She had her arms crossed to her chest and a hard look about her face as if she was unhappy about going on pass and being out of uniform. It seemed she could sense Vilan's eyes burning into for she started to turn to look at him. She would have caught Vilan staring at her if it wasn't for Hotshot.

"Yo Bones," Hotshot said cheerfully. Causing Vilan to snap his head to look at him just as Fox eyes landed on him. "You don't have any civillies or what?" Vilan looked over at Hotshot confused.

"My apologies I do not understand your question," Vilan said.

"Civilian cloths," Monkey translated. "You don't have any civilian clothes to wear on pass?"

"I do not," Vilan admitted. "When I left my home planet, I left only with the cloths on my back. I enlisted into the corps as soon as I could and they have given me everything I currently own."

"Well then," Hotshot said a smile coming to his lips. "Looks like we will have to take you shopping. Don't worry I'm make sure you look real nice."

"If you can find anything in his size," Hawk pointed out with a chuckle.

"That's going to be the tricky part," Monkey agreed. "It was hard to

find stuff just in my size I can't imagine we could even find anything for you."

"Hey Bones," Fox said in a unusually calm tone. Vilan turned to face her again their eyes meeting. "Don't let that idiot dress you." She explained pointing at Hotshot. "Unless you want to look like a douche bag." The rest of the rangers started laughing then expect Vilan who didn't know what that was and Hotshot who didn't think the joke was funny.

"I do just fine with my style," Hotshot scoffed. "Thank you very much."

"Don't worry man," Hawk said using one of his massive hands to slap him on the back. We're going into town to have fun not run errands."

"I agree," Hotshot explained. "But as fellow rangers it is our duty to ensure he has a good time. This includes but it not limited to getting him laid. Especially since I bet he hasn't known anything outside the corps."

"I'll help him," Ghost said saying something for the first time. "I mean he did save my life so it's the least I could do is be his wingman."

"Outstanding. Also make sure to bring that up, women love a hero," Hotshot said clapping his hands together a single time. "Just one thing though this is the Marine Corps not the Airforce. You are his 'battle buddy' not a 'wingman'."

"Well I hate to agree with you knuckle heads," Fox said her voice verging on a sigh. "But he did save my life as well so, as much as it pains me to say, I'll help him get laid." Everyone to include Vilan was just staring at Fox then, till Hotshot broke the silence.

"Hell yeah!" He whooped. "We've got a double agent no way we can lose!" He raised his hand in the air and held it up in front of Fox. She simply looked at his hand and crossed her arms again as her eyes narrowed.

"Fox," Vilan said causing her to look over and the two locked eyes again. "You saved my life on my first mission. By your customs we are..." Here Vilan paused as he tried to think of the correct word.

"Square?" Monkey asked trying to help the Sangheili out. "Even?"

"Yes, " Vilan said. "We are even are we not?" Fox stared into his eyes for a moment before responding.

"True," She said thoughtfully. "However you also did move all those ammo boxes by yourself since that asshole was a no show." She pointed at Ghost. "And that weakling Zen wasn't much help either."

"Hey!" A voice called out behind them causing them all to turn around. It was Zimmerman dressed in uniform and he walked towards them with Raptor, also in uniform, walking beside him. "I tried to help I just broke myself in the process." Zimmerman explained.

"Well broke dick," Hotshot said as the two rangers joined the group. "They going to let you go on pass?"

"No," Zimmerman said with a heavy sigh. "Anyone on profile may not leave post and this does includes passes."

"That's a shame," Hotshot said sincerity in his voice. "What about you?" He asked nodding towards Raptor. "We could always use another double agent for operation: Boner." Here everyone looked at Hotshot confused and not just Raptor. "Operation Boner." Hotshot said as if everyone should know. "You know, get Bones laid." He explained slapping Vilan on the back.

"As charming as that sounds," Raptor said eyeing Hotshot. "I'm going to stay here and monitor Zen's condition and so he doesn't get lonely."

"Your loss," Hotshot said flatly.

"Would you like me to stay with you as well my friend?" Vilan asked placing a hand on Zimmerman's shoulder. Hotshot opened his mouth to protest when a quick shove from Monkey shut him up.

"It's alright brother," Zimmerman said smiling. "You saved my life too. If I could go with you I would also try to help you. Probably doubly so for you save my ass a few times in basic as well."

"If you are sure," Vilan said staring into Zimmerman's eyes.

"Yeah," Zimmerman said with a wave of his hand. "Go have fun."

"Alright!" Stevens booming voice echoed around the room as everyone turned to look at him. He wore plain jeans and a green t-shirt that had UNSCMC written on it in black letters. "I've got the transport for tonight. Those of you going head outside and wait by the 'hog those of you staying...well I don't care what the fuck you do as long as you don't get in trouble."

"Alright lets go," Hotshot whooped as he lead the group of civilian dressed rangers, and Vilan outside.

"I have one question," Vilan said as they walked towards the barrack door.

"Shoot," Hotshot said. Vilan held his tongue for a bit for he didn't know what Hotshot meant but guessed it meant he could ask his question.

"What is 'getting laid'?" Vilan asked causing Hotshot and the whole group to stop in their tracks.

"You don't know?" Hotshot asked his voice full of awe. Vilan shook his head. "That's just sad. Here we have a killer, a hero and he's a virgin." Hotshot said with a single shake of his head. They started walking again.

"Well I think its adorable," Fox said causing Vilan to lightly blush and he didn't know why.



"You succubus," Hotshot said. "You just want to eat his innocent soul." Fox promptly slapped Hotshot on the back of the head. "Ow, see what I mean she's a creature straight from hell."

"So what is getting laid," Vilan asked again as they walked outside.

"Sex," Monkey said flatly but Vilan only looked at him still with a confused face. "Intercourse." He tried next. "Make love? Fucking?" Monkey tried only confusing Vilan more as Monkey tried to think of a word he would understand. "Mating?" Vilan's cheeks flushed as he ducked his head in embracement.

"Ah so you know that one," Hotshot said wilily. "You ever mated?"

"I have not," Vilan said. "On my planet I had not gotten the chance to before I had to leave. Then I do not know much about humans to...attempt mating with a human female."

"Well I swear you that before this night is I will get you acquainted with the female human," Hotshot said pointing at the sky as they emerged outside. The six rangers crammed into the transportation Warthog. Hawk getting the front seat, Monkey and Ghost squeezing together in the backseat on the driver side. Vilan was about to sit in the back facing seat with Hotshot when he stretched out his legs blocking off the seat next to him. Vilan looked a little confused by this gesture and even a little hurt.

"Sorry Bones," Hotshot said with a dumb smile on his face. "I need the extra leg room." Vilan nodded a single time before he made his way over to the passenger side back seats where Fox sat.

"Pardon me Fox," Vilan said causing her to look at him. "Hotshot is--"

"Is being a dick," Fox said eyeing Hotshot evilly, who smiled smugly before turning to look at Vilan again. "You can sit with me."

"Thank you," Vilan said as he climbed into the seat having to hunch forward to fit.

"No problem," Fox said as she and Vilan strapped themselves into their seats. As he did he twisted around so he was able to see Hotshot. He was smiling smugly but as Vilan looked at him he flashed him a thumbs-up. Vilan only looked on in confusion before he twisted back around and his eyes landed on Fox. He then realized how close they were and felt his face flush as he stared at his boots. Vilan suddenly felt a hand on his back. "Hey are you alright?" Fox asked concerned.

"Indeed," Vilan said lifting his head his heart pounding in his chest at her touch.

"Alright everybody ready to go?" Stevens asked as he climbed behind the wheel. All the rangers, except for Vilan whooped a single time. "Alright let's go." Stevens said as the 'hog's engine roared to life. It was a bouncing and jolty ride to the front gate where machinegun nest and bunkers were placed. Stevens stopped the vehicle at the impressive looking metal gate as a barely MP walked out of a bunker

and up to Stevens. He looked at Stevens and then to the Warthog full of rangers dress in assorted cloths and then he stared hard at Vilan.

"Going on pass Staff Sergeant?" The MP asked.

"Yep," Stevens said having over a stack of the approved passes. "It should be all in order." The MP looked at each pass and then to each ranger as they sat in the Warthog. The MP got to Vilan's pass saw his name and picture in the top right hand corner and eyed the Sangheili long and hard. The MP then leaned in close to Stevens and lowered his voice.

"I would consider maybe leaving the Elite here," The MP whispered. "I mean some of the civilians might not take to kindly to his...kind." Stevens looked back and Vilan and then turned to face the MP again.

"Private First Class Jones in a Marine in the United Nation Space Command Marine Corps," Stevens explained in a normal voice so all could hear. "He has multiple confirmed kills and several more unconfirmed. He has single handedly saved the lives of three fellow marines and has served with the up most conduct befitting a marine. So he has earned his leave like anyone else and he is entitled to said leave like any other \_marine\_. Is that clear corporal?"

"Understood sergeant," The MP said leaning back speaking in a normal volume voice again. "Sorry to keep you waiting sergeant." He handed back the passes to Stevens, who took them and tucked them under his seat. The MP took a few steps away from the vehicle before turning to face the bunker he came out of. He whistled sharply before drawing a large circle in the air with a finger. With the screech of grinding metal followed by rusted gears in need of oil the gate slowly opened allowing the rangers off post and for the first time not to get shot at.

"Thank you corporal," Stevens said before he drove off of post heading into town. The MP walked back into the bunker as his partner shut the gate.

"You own me a 20," The returning MP said to the sitting one.

"What?" The second MP asked confused.

"You own me 20," The first explained. "He exists."

"What?" The second said catching on. "Bullshit."

"I just saw him with my own two eyes," The first said. "The Elite marine and you know something else I think he might be a ranger."

"I don't believe half the shit you say," The second said as he turned to watch a laptop and the camera feeds displayed on it.

Meanwhile Stevens had finally turned off the dirt road that lead to the FOB and onto a paved one where a sign said a town was only five miles away. When they got onto the hardball the bumpy ride finally smoothed out.

"Alright where are we heading first?" Stevens asked the group.

"I don't know about you but I could use a drink," Hotshot called from the back. "The closest bar if you please Jack."

"Alright that's one idea," Stevens said with a chuckle. "Any objections?" The rest of the rangers held their peace. "Alright to the bar it is at three o'clock in the afternoon."

"That's 1500 Jack," Hotshot corrected.

"First round's on you then smartass," Stevens said with another chuckle. "That's an order."

"Yes staff sergeant!" Hotshot shouted moving to the sitting position of attention. He then turned to look at Vilan as he sat hunched over next to Fox as she leaned back her legs crossed at the ankles. "So Bones." Hotshot said getting Vilan's attention. Vilan sat up and looked up at the cocky ranger. "What are you looking for in a woman?"

"I do not understand what you mean," Vilan said.

"A mate," Monkey translated again. "What do you like in a mate. What she looks like and what she acts like ext."

"I am not entirely sure," Vilan said and then after thinking a bit. "I would like her fit and she should also be a skilled warrior. With the sprit and heart of a fierce warrior as well."

"So let me get this straight," Hotshot said a wicked smile on his face his finger under his chin. "You want a mate just...like...Fox." Both Vilan's and Fox's faces flushed as they both turned to glare at Hotshot who only smiled evilly at the two. Vilan ducked his head thinking it best not to try and say anything like when Zimmerman had almost tricked him back in basic. Fox however opened her mouth to shout at Hotshot when the Warthog screeched to a rough stop.

"Alright," Stevens said as he killed the engine. "We're here." Stevens had parked the vehicle in front of a small building. A bright glowing sign named the building as the Moonlit Bar. The rangers dismounted the vehicle and started making their way into the bar but not before Fox punched Hotshot in the arm...hard...three times. Vilan however remained in his seat face slightly flushed lost in thought.

"Come one buddy lets go inside," Hotshot said slapping Vilan on the shoulder with his left hand since his right arm hung limping at his side for he lost all feeling in it.

"You are right," Vilan said not looking up as Hotshot started to walk away. He stopped and turned back around to face the Sangheili a look of slight pity and knowing etched on his face.

"I know," Hotshot sighed using his left hand to place his right hand on Vilan's back. "If it was anyone else I would say they were crazy. However I think you two could survive each other." Vilan looked up at Hotshot again just in time to see him smile that wicked smile again. "And I have a plan."

"You do," Vilan said hopefully.

"Yep," Hotshot said stepping back his currently useless right arm sliding off his back. "Come on let's get a drink." Vilan stood up putting his booted feet on the ground just before Hotshot lead him into the bar. The two rangers stepped inside the small building the door making a soft chime as it slid back into the wall. The bar was set up just like any other hole in the wall. A long bar with shelves filled with liquor bottles and beer taps underneath. Stools sat in front of the bar a few people were sitting on. There was a dart board and a few arcade games along one wall, the rest of the space taken up with tables and chairs. The rest of the rangers were already sitting at a table in the corner. The two late comers were about to head over when the two people sitting at the bar had turn to see who had come in. The two were staring at Vilan with almost slack jaw expression. One of them got off his stool and started to walk over to Hotshot and Vilan.

"Stay cool and no matter what happens don't raise your voice," Hotshot whispered out of the side of his mouth. "I'll try to get Hawk over here see if he can't get him removed." Vilan only nodded as they watch the man approach. He stopped in front of the two rangers and stood in front of them lightly swaying on his feet staring up at Vilan.

"You ah mar-ine?" He asked his voice deep and slow.

"Yes sir," Vilan said nodding once.

"But y'all ah alien," The man said as he stared up at Vilan.

"Yes sir I am," Vilan said. The man seemed perplexed by this as he continued to stare at Vilan. He suddenly wore a large goofy smile.

"Well thank ya for y'all service," The man said extending his hand. Vilan knowing what that meant by now extended his claw and shook the man's hand. After the two shook hands the man let go of him and walked out the door muttering "Ah alien mar-ine, never seen that one be-for."

"Wow," Hotshot said surprised. "I was not expecting that."

"What did you think he was going to do?" Vilan asked.

"Never mind," Hotshot said starting to walk toward the table. They reached the table where Vilan sat next to Ghost and Stevens and Hotshot was about to sit next to him when Stevens spoke up.

"Bout time," Stevens said crossing his arms. "I'm thirsty and you're buying the first round. Remember?"

"Right got to spend that combat pay somehow," Hotshot said surprisingly happily. "Let's see if I got this correct. Jack and Coke." He pointed to Monkey. "Jack straight up." He pointed at Hawk. "Long Island Ice tea." Nodding towards Fox who glared at him. "Whatever they got on tap." Hotshot looked at Ghost. "Jameson." He pointed at Stevens who nodded. "And what are you drinking?" Hotshot asked looking at Vilan.

"I am not old enough to partake in alcoholic beverages," Vilan explained.

"Ah bullshit," Hotshot groans. "If you're old enough to get shot at and die for the UNSC you are old enough to drink. That's how I look at it. What does our very own MP have to say about that though?"

"Eh...he looks 21 to me," Hawk said with a shrug.

"Alright then what are you having?" Hotshot asked leaning in closer to Vilan.

"I do not know," Vilan said truthfully. "I have never had one before."

"Don't worry I'll hook you up," Hotshot said as he walked off to the bar. The rest of the marines sat at the table patiently for their drinks. Vilan was about to say something when Stevens held up a hand.

"Drinks first then conversation," Stevens explained. "That's how it works." Vilan nodded in understanding although he really didn't. They waited a few more moments before Hotshot returned with an arm full of glasses holding different colored liquids. He passed out the glasses before he sat down himself. The glass he set in front of himself and Vilan was very small and full of a clear liquid.

"This a shot," Hotshot explained holding up his own glass. "You drink it like this." He then held it up to his lips, tilted his head back and drank it all in one gulp. Vilan held up his own glass like he had seen Hotshot do and dumped into his mouth and choked it down. He immediately started to cough as the liquid burned his throat on the way down. The rest of the rangers chuckled as Stevens slapped him on the back. "Good huh?" Hotshot asked as Vilan coughed.

"Indeed," Vilan said weakly.

"Great I'll get us some more," Hotshot said getting up before Vilan could stop him.

"So," Monkey said taking a sip of his drink. "I have to ask because I have been wanting to know for a long time. How does a Sangheili, such as yourself, end up in the UNSCMC? If you don't mind me asking of course." Vilan looked around and everyone seemed to be staring at him wanting to know the answer.

"It is a long tale," Vilan said as he stopped coughing.

"Telling long stories is one of the things you do while drinking," Stevens explained holding up his glass. "So if you wouldn't mind, tell us."

"Alright," Vilan said. "First off I am really only half Sangheili the other half is human." Here the rest of the rangers looked a little shocked. "My father was a marine himself. He fought in the first human Covenant war and the conflict with the Jiralhanae. My father was able to speak and write in the Sangheili language. Because of this he was made a file leader in a Sangheili company when the UNSC

was experimenting with integrated units. Back when the UNSC had an alliance with the Sangheili. When the war was over my father had nothing to go back to like most marines. He was drafted early on and his home planet was."

"Glassed?" Monkey asked and then winched. "Sorry."

"Indeed it was," Vilan said with a sad nod. "His field marshal, uh company commander Huka Hamanee, a Sangheili he had become close with though battle officered to my father for him to come live with him on his planet instead. So he went back with him and met Hamanee's wife and her..." Vilan paused as he tried to think of the right word. He knew what it was in Sangheili but he didn't know what it would be in human or if they even had a word. "His wife had another female Sangheili to help her with her daily life. They were not related and only female Sangheilis of noble decent get such a..." He paused again as Vilan wondered what word he could use.

"A lady in waiting," Ghost explained for him. "She had a lady in waiting."

"Thank you mister fantasy nerd," Monkey said. "Now can you please let him finish his story."

"Hamanee's wife, Yuka, " Vilan continued his story. "Told stories of my father to her...lady in waiting." Vilan said turning to look at Ghost to ensure he had used the right term. Ghost nodded that he did. "Well she fell in love with my father she even though she has never met him. When they did my father fell in love with her, they were wed and I was the result."

"Your father got it on with a female Sangheili," Monkey said a smile a mile wide on his face. "A lady in waiting in fact, man I want to meet him."

"That's great," Stevens said. "But that doesn't explain how or why you became a marine."

"That was just the first half," Vilan explained his voice dropping a bit. "The...happy half. Years passed my father was a farmer but a good father still. There was a Covenant up rising on the planet. My father and Hamanee gave their lives holding back a platoon worth of rebel, traitor scum allowing myself, my mother and Yuka to escape. We made it to UNSC controlled space and were picked up by a passing ship. Since my father was a citizen of the UNSC and when he married my mother she and I both became citizens as well. I enlisted into the UNSCMC to avenge his death."

"Wow," Ghost said. "That sounds just like a fantasy story. Expect revenge never turns out to well for those who seek it."

"Shut up nerd," Monkey said slapping Ghost on the back. "Everything awesome Bones just said you just ruined."

"Hey," Hotshot said as he walked back up to the table after a longer then normal leave of absence. The rest of the sitting marines looked up at his voice to see him being escort by two attractive woman. One a blonde the other a brunet. "I would like you to met Sarah." He said pointing to the blonde. "And Lucy." He explained pointing at the brunet.

"Is this the one?" Lucy said looking at Vilan blushing a little. "The hero."

"Yep," Hotshot said a smile on his face. Everyone looked at Hotshot with confusion, no one more so than Vilan. All expect Fox who glared Hotshot but especially Lucy. "The hero with the large...heart." Hotshot explained smiling sinisterly on the last word.

"Hey there handsome," Lucy said placing a hand on Vilan's back. "What do you say? Why don't you come back to my place?"

"Well I...I," Vilan stammered confused.

"This is where you say yes," Hotshot whispered to Vilan.

"Yes?" Vilan asked more then said. The sound of a chair scrapping along the floor startled them all. The sound was caused when Fox forcefully pushed herself back from the table before she stood up and stormed out from the bar. They all watched her go stunned.

"You better go talk to her," Hotshot said nodding towards Vilan. "She might actually listen to you." Nodding once in understanding Vilan got up and quickly chased after Fox. Hotshot sat down in his chair as Sarah and Lucy took Vilan's and Fox's.

"How'd I do?" Lucy asked Hotshot.

"Excellent my darling," Hotshot said with a smile as the rest of the rangers stared at him confused. "Jealousy, works every time."

"What did you do?" Stevens demanded crossing his arms.

"Just set things in motion is all," Hotshot explained with a smug smile. Outside the bar Vilan had caught up to Fox as she stormed off.

"Fox what is the problem?" Vilan asked causing her to whip around a fire in her eyes.

"The problem?!" Fox demanded poking Vilan in the chest. "Is you have just met that...that harlot and you were going to go home with her!"

"What is a harlot?" Vilan asked confused. "Is going home with one not a custom of your species? What does going home with a harlot entail?" Fox rubbed her forehead as she calmed down remembering who she was talking to.

"She was going to try and seduce you," Fox explained which Vilan only looked on more confused. "Try to mate with you." Vilan's face flushed deeply then.

"I would not have done that," Vilan explained.

"And why not?" Fox demanded poking him hard in the chest again.

"I only want to mate with yo-" Vilan started to say but stopped himself. Fox's eyes grew wide as she stared at Vilan.

"What did you say?" Fox asked.

"Well... I...just meant...I," Vilan stammered when Fox grabbed his neck and pulled him down to her level. Her eyes glowed a evilly as they burned into his. Vilan braced himself for blow that was sure to come instead she kissed deeply him on the mandibles. When she pulled away Vilan's face was even more flushed then before.

"Come with me," She whispered before she lead him away by the hand.

## 18. Deja vu

Vilan let Fox lead him by the hand, he was in an almost dream like state from the kiss she had given him moments ago. He followed her not really paying attention to where she was taking him. All he could think about was his heart thumping in his chest and how unrelievedly hot his face was due to the heavily blush on it. Vilan didn't know what she had planned for him but he let his mind run wild. Thoughts of the woman he met in basic, the one Zimmerman had dubbed smiley, flashed into his mind but with Fox replacing smiley. Something happened then he would have thought impossible his blush deepened and he felt a tingling in his lower region. He looked down in shame for thinking such lewd thoughts about someone he respected. Fox stopped suddenly causing Vilan to bump into her as he looked up sharply. They had stopped in front of a door with a number on it. To the left and right of the door were more doors with numbers on them as well. Either going up or down depending on the direction they went from the door they were currently standing in front of. Fox reached out and pushed the buzzer for the motel room. After several moments of nothing happing she tried again and when nobody answered she smiled wickedly.

"Prefect," Fox remarked as she removed a knife from her jacket pocket. She pushed a button and a blade shot straight out of the handle. She used it to pop the cover of the keycard reader next to the door to expose a circuit card as a few wires. Fox used the knife's blade to tap a few connectors and components on the circuit card. She then used the metal blade to forcefully connect two components on the circuit card causing a blue spark to arc across the blade. The door slid back into the wall granting them access to the room. As Vilan watched this he couldn't help but think of Private Stone when he had broken into the weapons' racks back in basic.

"I guess you were not always on the straight and narrow before your enlistment?" Vilan asked his mandibles twisted into a grin. Fox turned around surprised that Vilan understood such things and knew what to say.

"Well a girls got to eat," Fox mocked scoffed as she pressed the button on the knife again causing the blade to get pulled back into the handle. She grabbed him by the hand again and pulled into the motel room that neither of them had paid for the lights automatically coming on. Once inside Fox shut and locked the door behind him before pushing Vilan to the bed rather forcefully. He sat down heavily and bounced a few times. He looked down at the bed confused as he used his legs to bounce a few more times.

"What is wrong with this bunk?" Vilan asked as he looked at Fox but



continued to bounce as to test the bed. "It is much too soft and...plush." A smile tugged at Fox's normally straight face.

"You really have only been a marine since you have been part of the UNSC haven't you?" Fox asked as Vilan nodded. "Well first off this is a bed not a bunk. The easiest way you can tell the two apart is that a bed is bigger and actually comfortable."

"I see," Vilan said as he stopped bouncing. Fox let out a small chuckle as she patted the top of his smooth head.

"That is what I find adorable about you," Fox explained. "You're a hardened killer, probably one of the most hardcore ones I have ever met. Yet you have a kind of childish innocence about you when it comes to certain things. Now I'm going to go get ready I suggest you do the same." With that Fox disappeared into the bathroom leaving Vilan confused and a little scared for he didn't know what he was suppose to get ready for. Not really sure what to do he stood up and walked over to the mirror that was above the dresser that was between the two beds. He made sure his uniform that no wrinkles in it and it was still squared away. The sound of a door open caused him to turn to the face the sound. Fox had come out of the bathroom and when Vilan saw her his mandibles parted in shock. For she was only dressed in her undergarments. They were black in color and rather plain and simple more for practical purposes then showing off her body. Vilan didn't mind as it still showed of plenty for him as he stared at her. She was slender with toned muscles but still had very feminine curves about her.

"I told you to get ready," Fox said placing a hand on her hip and leaning to the right. Vilan didn't say anything as he continued to gawk at Fox. She sighed lightly before she snapped her fingers to get his attention.

"My apologies," Vilan said bringing his eyes up to lock them with Fox's. "What am I to get ready for and how should I get ready for it?" Fox sighed again but then smiled as she walked over to Vilan deliberately swinging her hips.

"Here let me help you," Fox said softly as she stood in front of Vilan. She reached out her hands running along the front of his uniform jacket. Her hands slowly slipped into the folds as she unbuttoned it before taking it off. "Raise your arms above your head." Fox ordered in a husky whisper. Vilan did as instructed moving his arms above his head moving as if he was in a dream. Her smooth hands then slipped into his belt line and curled around the edge of his olive drab t-shirt un-tucking it. She then lifted above his head and threw it to the floor so he was bare chested. "My, my, my." Fox remarked as she ran a hand down Vilan's stomach and his well toned abdominal muscles. "Were you born like this or did you have to work at it?"

"Yes," Vilan said his voice barely above a whisper as he watched her hands work. Fox couldn't help but smile as he hadn't answered her question.

"Let's see what we have to work with," Fox whispered as loosened his belt so she could pull down his cargo pants. She then pulled down his corps issued underwear to free his erection he got from just looking at the almost nude Fox. "Well look at you." Fox whispered lustfully

as one of her slender hands gently encircled his shaft and started to slowly move along it's length. Vilan could do nothing but gasp as his breath caught in his chest. He watched her moments seeming hypnotized as it somehow felt much better then when smiley had done it. Vilan watched as her hand started to increase in speed savoring every moment of pleasure. He then thought that he was being rather selfish and should return the favor. He didn't know exactly how but his found his hand reaching out and gently creasing her thigh.

It was as if his hand was processed as it slowly moved up and down her thigh gently rubbing it. He felt rather then saw his hand slide into her underwear he gasped as he felt the soft skin of her forbidden area. Fox moaned out loud as Vilan gently and slowly rubbed the area just above her moist and delicate folds. She gasped loudly and moaned louder as he slipped one of his longer middle fingers into her. The slender appendage easily parting her moist folds as Fox lowered her head to rest it on Vilan's chest. Vilan could feel her moist inside pulsate around his finger trying to draw it in deeper. He didn't really know what he was doing but let his instincts take over. He started to move his finger slowly in and out of her as she started to moan even louder. He guessed he must be doing something right as she had stopped with her actions to cling to him tightly.

He didn't mind as he slipped a second finger into her and started to work them in tandem in and out of her he just wanted to please her. Her breathing became pants as she gripped him tighter and pressed her face deeper into his chest. He lowered his head and rested it on her shoulder before he started to lick her neck making sure she felt his warm moist tongue.

"Oh," Fox moaned. "You're doing good for your first time. Now move your hand faster." Vilan couldn't help but smile taking a break from her.

"I could," Vilan explained as he pulled his hand out of her underwear his fingers slick with her juices. A short soft whine managed to escape her lips before she glared at him for stopping. He slowly knelt down and gripped her underwear on either side. "If this garment was not in the way." He gently slid her underwear down to her ankles before he stared at her moist womanhood. Vilan stopped to stare at it for a second for he had never seen one and the only one he had wanted to see was hers. Now it was right there in front of him and he wasn't entirely sure what he should do with it. He remained kneeling but slipped his fingers into her as he intently watched his fingers part her folds. She moaned out as her hands went to either side of his head and started to rub it. He pulled them out and pushed them back in starting to move them rapidly.

"That's good," Fox moaned grabbing his head tighter. "Now...ah, now use your tongue." He heisted for he was unsure of what he was suppose to do with his tongue and how she would even taste. He moved his head closer so his mandibles were inches from her, Vilan inhaled deeply through his nose surprised. Coming from her was the sweet scent of her arousal and it was the most pleasant thing he had ever smelt. She moaned out again as the air moved over her sensitive area. Parting his mandibles wide so they would be out of the way he slowly stuck out his long slender tongue the tip stopping just inches from her moist womanhood. Not sure how to exactly proceed he closes his eyes and pressed his tongue to the bottom of her slit and ran it up moving

along the part. Her skin felt amazing smooth and soft to his tongue and she tasted sweet. He did it again starting at the bottom and moving up.

"Oh yes," She moaned happily gripping his head tighter. "Faster." Happy to be doing it correctly he started to move his tongue faster licking both up and down as he worked his fingers faster. As he did this he started to notice that more of the sweet tasting liquid start to come from there and he moved his tongue in a small circle to get them all. When he did he heard Fox moan out loud again. Hearing that he moved his tongue in a circle once again causing her to moan loudly. Putting two and two together he started to rapidly move his tongue around in circles every once in awhile moving it up and down.

"Yes!" Fox cried out. "Oh god yeeess!" Her grip only tightened on his head holding him in place. He could feel her insides tighten and pulsate around his fingers. He started to move his tongue even faster as it actually slipped inside of her slit a few times. This caused her to moan the loudest as she had his head in a near death grip. Placing his free hand on her hip he twisted his head to get a better angle as he slipped his tongue into her. He moved it around rapidly now feeling her walls grip and pull at his tongue trying to draw it in deeper. Fox's breathing had become pants as her head rolled back looking up at the ceiling.

"Jones!" She moaned out. "Yes! Yes! ah fuck!...JONES!" She cried out his name as her orgasm surged through her. He felt some of the effects as her walls clamped down on his fingers and tongue as more of her juices exploded from her. However he didn't stop not realizing he was suppose to as he continued to lick her and thrust his fingers in and out. This only allowed her to ride out the wave of pleasure as her knees gave way the only thing keeping her up was Vilan and the death grip Fox had on his head. Finally not being able to take it anymore and needing something more she pushed his head away from her. Vilan looked up both startled and confused.

"Is something wrong?" He asked looking up at her as she looked down panting heavily. "Did I do something wrong." She didn't respond only pushed him back forcefully so he landed on the bed on his back. Her hands went to her back where she quickly and efficiently undid her bra letting it fall to the floor next to her underwear. She then moved over to stand above him as he looked up unsure of what to do. Got onto all fours she slowly started to crawl up his body making sure to brush his skin with hers as much as possible. She now lay on top of him his erect member poking against her slit. He leaned down and started to kiss his neck and suckle on it gently. As she rocked her hips the lips of her womanhood rubbing the head of his throbbing member. It was his turn to moan as he felt her tongue working the side of his neck and the sensitive head of his member being rubbed by her slit.

She slowly sat up sitting on his lower stomach as she smiled down at him. She cupped his face in her hands before she lifted her hips as slid back more. She moved so the tip of his manhood was pointing at her slit before she eased down. She stopped just as the tip was pressing against her starting to barely part her. She looked down and saw look of anticipation on Vilan's face and smiled. She slowly lowered herself letting his member part her and slid into her moaning loudly as she wasn't the only one as he did to. Once her hips met his

and he was hilted she sat there for a bit panting heavily hands resting on his chest. He looked up at her waiting as her insides gripped and pulled at his member already feeling amazing as neither of them had started to move yet. She smiled down at him once again as she gripped his wrists and moved his hands so they gripped her butt firmly. Getting the idea he started to gently squeeze her ass feeling the soft skin with his hands and loving it. She slowly slid her hands back up his body till they came to rest on his chest again.

"Ready?" She asked lustfully as she smiled.

"Yes," He said his voice barely above a whisper. She started to bounce her hips then, not slow or gentle but fast and rough. This was all so new to Vilan as she rode him his member quickly sliding in and out of her moist slit. He could only moan and he grabbed her ass tighter as her hips slammed into his.

"Oh Jones," Fox moaned. "You're so...so deep inside...I love it." She started to go even faster leaning forward some her head hanging down as she panted. Then every time she slammed down she would rock her hips forward to make sure she felt every inch of him. She was loving this the way he spread and filled her, the way his member twitched around inside of her and she loved the way she was taking him. Vilan was enjoying it as well as his mind started to haze with pleasure and lust as he let his instincts kick in. He started to thrust up into her causing her to moan loudly. "Oh Jones!" She moaned again. "I love your cock!" He didn't know what that was bet felt like he should pay a compliment back.

"I love your cock as well," Vilan moaned. Fox couldn't help but snort out a quick laugh before they turned back to breathless moans.

"Leave the...dirty talk...to me," She panted as she started to move even faster. "Oh yeess!" He started to thrust up faster his hands moving to her hips to hold her steady. He started to move his hips faster as he watched her breasts bounce with the motion. He started to feel a tingling in his lower region as some started to build. Although he had never felt this before he knew what it was as he moved his hips wanting to reach his peek.

"Fox I am going to," He started to say but stopped as he didn't know what the word would be. He moved his hips faster and grunted before he moaned again.

"It's alright," Fox moaned understanding. "Fill me!...Fill me Jones!" Again he didn't know what that meant but kept moving his hips at a fevered pace as she still bounced on top of him. "Just whatever you do." She moaned. "Don't stop...Just don't stop!" Taking her words to heart he moved his hips even faster as he started to violently rock her hips back and forth every time she slammed them down. "Ah Jones!" She cried happily. "Jones...Jones...JONES!" She cried out his name as he caused her to climax again slamming her hips down so he was buried inside of her and circling them quickly. He gasped as he felt her insides clamp down on his cock as she moved her hips so he felt her in every way possible. He felt his cock twitch just before his seed exploded from the tip. He let out a roar as his orgasm exploded from him as he thrust his hips up with extra force causing her breasts to shake. His seed spilled into her so much that the excess spilled out of her and onto his thighs.

"Oh Jones," Fox breathed as she leaned down to wrap her arms around Vilan as they both stopped moving. She slowly lifted her hips up pulling his softening member from her as she crawled up his body. She kissed his neck lovingly before she whispered in his ear. "You did amazing for your first time." She then sat up sitting on his chest as she smiled down warmly at him. "Now get showered and dressed we have to get back before we're missed." She slowly got off of him and stood up heading to the bathroom to shower herself. When she left him he couldn't help but feel naked, although he was, he missed her body against his. He sat up on the bed and smiled sure he'd never forget this night.

Both cleaned and dressed now the two rangers started to walk back towards the bar enjoying the crisp night air. Each had an arm around the other's waist although Fox had to reach up and he had to reach down.

"Fox," Vilan said.

"Yes?" She asked looking up her voice a little dreamily.

"We left that bunkroom a mess," Vilan pointed out. "Won't someone be angry?" She just chuckled softly.

"That was a bedroom of a motel," She explained. "You know there's more to life then the corps. But yes someone will be pissed but don't worry they have people to clean it."

"Ah," He nodded in understanding as the parking lot their Warthog was parked in came into view. She removed her arm from around him and he looked down confused and taken back.

"For appearances dear," She explained patting his arm lovingly showing him a side of her she had never shown anyone before. "Fraternization is forbidden while on deployment." He nodded in understand just as the door for the bar opened. They both looked over to see Hawk and Stevens caring Hotshot between them Hotshot's head hanging down as the two bigger rangers dragged him.

"Bones," Stevens said happy to see Vilan. "Give us a hand here. Bastard about drank the place dry." Vilan rushed over to take Stevens' position as he helped Hawk carry him towards the Warthog. "He couldn't have chosen a worse time."

"Why what's up Jack?" Fox asked as Ghost and Monkey walked out of the bar Monkey swaying a bit as he leaned heavily on Ghost.

"Pass is canceled," Steven's explained. "We have a priority one mission. RTB for brief and kit out. We were late an hour ago lets go." Both Vilan and Fox snapped into action as Vilan helped carry Hotshot to the Warthog as Fox went to help Monkey.

"What's up Bones?" Hotshot asked suddenly slurring trying to lift his head but giving up. "You and Fox get it in or what."

"I am sorry I don't understand," Vilan admitted as him and Hawk sat Hotshot down in a seat and started to strap him in.

"You tell him that is none of his god damn business," Fox said as she

and Ghost helped Monkey into the seat next to Hotshot.

"That means you did," Hotshot slurred happily. "So how was it buddy? Did you fuck her or did she fuck you?" Fox slapped Hotshot in the face hard but all he did was laugh as he couldn't feel pain.

"Hurry up and strap in," Stevens ordered as he jumped behind the wheel and started the engine. The rest of the rangers strapped themselves in Fox and Vilan sitting next to each other again. Stevens peeled out of the parking lot gunning the engine as the Warthog started to bounce and buck.

"Slow down would you Jack," Hotshot said just before he gagged. "I don't feel too good. Pull over."

"Not a chance in hell," Stevens said just as Hotshot wretched and threw up over the side of the 'hog splattering the pavement with foul smelling vomit.

"Ah geez," Hotshot groaned just before he threw up again.

"Maybe you'll mix a little food in with your alcohol from now on," Monkey said slapping Hotshot on the back causing him to throw up again but this time nothing came out but a yellowish bile.

"When I can I'm going to punch you," Hotshot groaned. "In all three of your fucking faces." He threatened just before he started to wretch again. As they rode back to the FOB Fox's hand snaked down and grabbed Vilan's before she patted his thigh gently. Vilan looked at her and smiled as he squeezed her hand tighter. Stevens only slowed and stopped the Warthog once they reached the gate to the FOB to show the MPs their IDs again.

"That was a short pass sergeant," The MP remarked handing the IDs back to Stevens.

"Can it," Stevens almost growled as he was not happy his pass was cut short for a mission and he had one piss drunk marine and another that was tipsy. Stevens drove the vehicle till they reached their barracks and stopped. "Bones jump out grab Zen and find Raptor. Tell her we need to speed bag Hotshot...again. We'll met her at the aid station tell Zen to met the rest of us in the command bunker in the briefing room."

"Roger," Vilan said as he jumped down turning to smile at Fox before Stevens drove away. He rushed into the barrack and into the sleeping bay passing the empty bunks to enter the seemingly empty day room. "Zimmerman!" Vilan called out. "Are you here my friend?"

"Yeah," Zimmerman said quickly sounding startled. He had popped up from a couch that the back was facing Vilan. Vilan noticed that for some reason Zimmerman had removed his shirt and he was sweaty.

"Are you alright?" Vilan asked concerned.

"Yeah I'm fine," He said quickly. "What do you need?"

"We have a mission," Vilan explained. "We need to met in the command bunker. Do you know where Raptor is? For I need to find her."

"Yes what do you need?" She asked surprising Vilan as she popped up from the couch as well. She too wasn't wearing a shirt covering her breasts with her arm. She was also sweaty and her hair was messed up. Zimmerman face flushed deeply once Vilan saw Raptor like that.

"Um," Vilan said a little taken back. "Sergeant Stevens request you met him at the aid station to speed bag Hotshot."

"Alright give me a minute," She said before she kissed Zimmerman. "We'll have to finish this some other time sweetie." She then disappeared from Vilan's line of sight as she bent down to pull her uniform back on. Zimmerman crouched down to get dressed as well as an awkward silence fell over the group. It was Raptor who reappeared first now fully dressed and hair fixed.

"Take me to him Bones," Raptor said walking up to Vilan. "And you Zimmerman head to the command bunker. We'll meet you there."

"Right this way," Vilan said leading her outside and marching quickly towards the aid station.

"Un Bones," Raptor said a little shyly. "You're not going to...uhm tell what you saw-"

"I do not know what you speak of," He said looking down and smiled.

"Good then I won't tell anyone you had sex with Fox," Raptor said lightly patting his arm. He looked at her stunned and confused. "It was written all over your face you just got laid." He started to rub his face with his arm causing her to laugh. "Oh you are adorable aren't you." He didn't say anything just blushed lightly as he lead her to the aid station. He lead her into a room where Hotshot say on the cot with Stevens by his side slapping his face trying to wake him up.

"Hotshot," He said as he slapped him. "Perez come on man wake up."

"Here let me," Raptor said pulling Stevens away. She shined a small light in his eyes his pupils didn't respond. "How much he have to drink?"

"I don't know," Stevens said rubbing the back of his head. "A lot."

"He vomit?" She asked putting the flashlight away and pulling out two IV bags and their tubes.

"Yes," Stevens said. "A lot."

"Good," She said as she stuck an IV in each arm. "Saves me the trouble of pumping his stomach." She handed a mouth guard to Stevens. "You know what to do. Bones grab his shoulders and hold him down. How's Monkey and Hawk?"

"Hawk got a high fucking tolerance," Stevens explained as he opened Hotshot's mouth and stuck the mouth guard in. "Monkey is a little tipsy. I had them both drink two canteens of water before heading to the command bunker. Then I told them to drink more as they waited.

I'm just worried about Hotshot here."

"Don't worry I'll get him sober in 15 mikes," Raptor said as she held an IV bag in each hand. "It's just going to hurt a lot."

"Good," Stevens smirked. "The bastard deserves it."

"Alright," Raptor said. "Hold him down tight." She nodded towards Vilan who pushed down harder to hold the passed out Hotshot down. Raptor then squeezed both IV bags as hard as she could forcing the liquid into Hotshot's veins. Nothing happened at first until she loosened her grip on the bags and squeezed them again. This time Hotshot's eyes flew open as he started to scream as the liquid flowed into his veins very painfully. He tried to squirm and buck but Stevens and Vilan held him still.

"Take the fucking pain!" Stevens growled. "Take it!" Hotshot nodded weakly as he clamped his mouth shut grunting in pain as Raptor still squeezed the bags. She continued to squeeze both bags until they were both dry as Hotshot grunted in pain and flinched as Vilan and Stevens held him. Once both bags were empty she pulled the needles out of his arms as he lay there panting in pain but almost sober.

"Take this for the headache and the pain," Raptor said handing Hotshot two piles and a cup of water.

"I fucking love you guys," Hotshot mocked as he swallowed the piles.

"Let's go," Stevens said helping Hotshot to his feet as he swayed a little unsteadily but he would sober more quickly. "Bones help me." Vilan walked over and quickly threw his arms around Hotshot as the four rangers made their way as quickly as possible to the command bunker. Inside was their squad and an entire battalion of the 17th ODSB bridge. At the front of the room was an ONI coronel and a lieutenant. Both glared at the rangers and they took their seats by the rest of the squad.

"Now that we're all here we can begin," The coronel said sounding a little disgusted at the fact the most of the rangers were still in civilian cloths since they hadn't have time to change.

"Hey gave me some of that," Hotshot whispered to Monkey who was sipping from a canteen.

"Fuck you get your own," Monkey whispered back.

"We have a high risk high reward mission planed but we have a limited window of opportunity. Hence the recall and the canceled passes," The coronel explained as holo map came to life in the middle of the room. "We have found the Covenant's main base of operations in this sector that's the good news. The bad news is they built it over one of our own outposts left over from the last war. It's in ideal position for defense and heavily fortified so a land assault could only come from one direction and it would be a slaughter for our forces. Then an aerial assault in out, the bastards are using out own anti air and radar against us." He paused looking around the room.

"However there is going to be a storm tonight in roughly," He looked at his watch. "One hour and 30 minutes. The power for the air defense



is not located at the outpost, a weakness that was not lost on us but one we are going to exploit. The power is supplied by a reactor 10 miles from the outpost near this lake here." He pointed at the map. "A small team is going to be inserted by air into the lake three miles from the reactor using the storm as cover. Using the lake and storm as cover there is a water intake used to cool the reactor you can use to enter the reactor. Your mission is to covertly take the reactor off line. Once done the 56th ODST battalion will drop in behind them to hit the outpost from behind and hopefully distract them as an armor assault hits them from the front. Any questions?" No one said anything.

"The one's launching the raid on the reactor are the ranger squad," The coronel explained eyeing the rangers. "I was told this squad was the best and that is why you were recalled. You are to get in, shut it down and get out with engaging the enemy as little as possible. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir!" The rangers shouted as Hotshot and Monkey mumbled.

"Outstanding," The coronel said waving for the lieutenant to step forward. "This is Lieutenant Jenkins he will be in command of the mission to take down the reactor. He will also be the mission specialist responsible for taking the reactor off line."

"Greetings," Jenkins said. "I look forward to works with you." The rangers scowled as they didn't like the Idea of a Navy officer an ONI spook would be ordering them around.

"Alright if there are no questions you are dismissed," The coronel said. "Section leaders put them to work." With that the two ONI officers left as the rest of the troops started to mill about talking to their squad and platoon leaders. The rangers gathered around Stevens.

"Alright," Stevens said. "Ghost I want you in the armory and I want ranger carbines made up for all of us." He then turned to Raptor. "Is Zen cleared for this mission?" She thought about it only for a moment.

"No," She said plainly. "Not if he has to swim and drop from a Pelican moving at 30 miles an hour."

"But," Zimmerman started to protest wanting to be a part of the mission.

"I don't have time to argue you're staying here," Stevens snapped. "Now the rest of you I want suited up and in the armory in 10 mikes. There will be another brief specific to our mission then. Let's move people." With that the rangers hurried to their lockers to change. As they walked Monkey couldn't help but notice that Vilan had lowered his head in thought.

"What's wrong their Bones," Monkey asked slapping him on the back.

"I am not sure," Vilan admitted. "But everything about this mission seems...somehow familiar. It is not just that though. It feels..."

wrong somehow...like something horrible is going to happen. But worst for all I feel like I cannot escape it."

"Those are some heavy words," Monkey said. "I think you might have had too much to drink. Come on let's get suited up." Vilan nodded but still felt something strangely familiar about the mission.

End  
file.